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The saint® MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL

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Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

In this issue

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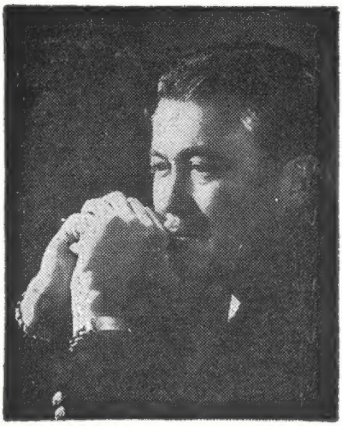
LESLIE CHARTERIS

WATCH FOR The saint ON TV

miss phipps considers the cat

A New Story by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION



Of all the idiotic conventions with which modern man has spinelessly permitted himself to be trammelled, the neck-tie, to my mind, is the most utterly fatuous.

As an optional article of adornment, a possible splash of color in a drab ensemble, an outlet for bizarre originality or a badge of membership in some fraternity, I have nothing against it for those who care to wear it. But as an obligatory and indispensable article of male attire, the ultimate symbol of class and respectability, and the open sesame to all elegant salons and saloons, it far surpasses the next comparably asinine requirement that a coat should also be worn, regardless of whether the climate, the season, or the heating arrangements make such a garment superfluous for reasons of warmth. The coat, I have been told, is necessary to protect certain hypersensitive ladies from the nausea which might be induced by the sight of hairy masculine forearms exposed while they are at the trough. But the neck-tie serves no function even of preserving the most fanatical canons of decency. It is simply an appendage, actually more pointless than a handkerchief in the breast pocket on which, in the last extremity, some barbarian bereft of Kleenex might blow his nose.

And yet this arbitrary piece of fabric is regarded as a more important criterion of admissibility to the fancier bistros than whether the collar it goes around is clean; and invitations which reconditely specify "black tie" will let in anyone who wears one, without checking to see whether his fingernails are rimmed with the same color.

It may be startling for readers of these comments, whose fathers and grandfathers before them lived under the same yoke, to be reminded that the neck-tie has not always been the touchstone to determine whether a man is "properly dressed". In much better days, a gentleman's costume was in a state of continual evolution, as it followed the more successful fantasies of the leaders of fashion. In those halcyon days, no extravagance was tabu *per se*, even though it might fail to catch on. The test was not the style of clothing, but the man who wore it. Correctness was determined by the upper strata of a very class-conscious society.

One of the penalties of today's selfconscious extension of democracy is that the veto on style and originality has been delegated to an immutable phalanx of head waiters, who with the stubborn timidity of lackeys have resolved that any change from the existing order is fraught with incalculable dangers. Not so long ago this resulted in such a pinnacle of imbecility as the so-called "bolo tie", which looked like nothing more than a bootlace threaded through some small ornament with the necessary holes in it, instead of being knotted—which, indeed, was all it was. But it was worn in the ritual location around the neck, and therefore met the essential requirement of the code.

Perhaps, though, it was also the most significant manifestation we have yet seen of this abject servitude. Even a slave of old was not condemned to spend his life with a noose around his neck.

Ken Chaplin

The saint MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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instead of the saint – V

by LESLIE CHARTERIS

THE SUBJECT of my Introduction inside this month's front cover is by no means a new-born bee in my bonnet. In fact, it has been a pet peeve of mine ever since I discovered (after an upbringing in the most conventional British public-school and University tradition) that there actually were some high-class places, such as the French Riviera, where in suitable weather one could be welcome almost anywhere without a coat and tie, morning or evening, except possibly in the snottiest Casinos, which as far as I am concerned are entitled to inflict any discomfort on anyone who is stupid enough to frequent them.

I am by nature allergic to Causes of most kinds, and too indolent to do much even about those I approve of; but there have been some momentous issues on which I felt it a civic duty to make a stand, lest it should be bruited that Charteris was never a serious-minded citizen at heart and ever watchful for the betterment of the community. And one hot day in Hollywood, California, in 1945, the last war being over and the world made temporarily safe for more trivial issues, I drew up and circulated the following manifesto, to which I invited all good men and true to subscribe:

> WHEREAS we the undersigned are free citizens of a free country;
>
> AND WHEREAS we are not aware of any laws or party affiliations which require us to dress up in trick

costumes or uniforms other than those of the Armed Forces, the police, the Salvation Army, or the street cleaning department;

AND WHEREAS we object to having our sartorial preferences criticized by head waiters in hired tuxedoes;

AND WHEREAS we consider ourselves men of great physical beauty and distinguished bearing;

AND WHEREAS we are accustomed to spending large sums of money on shirts of fine material, gay colors, and artistic pattern, which are designed to delight the eye of the beholder;

AND WHEREAS we are unable to regard our forearms and collarbones as in any way capable of causing offense or nausea to any persons fortunate enough to be allowed to see them;

AND WHEREAS we maintain that the exposure of these areas of epidermis, if innocent in the male when performed at beaches and swimming pools, must be equally innocent anywhere else, and certainly no less innocent than the same acepted exposure of the female;

AND WHEREAS we affirm that the said exposure of the male is even less likely than the identical exposure of the female to inspire lascivious thoughts in the minds of the spectators, and thereby contribute to a general outbreak of debauchery and the corruption of public morals;

NOW THEREFORE we hereby resolve and demand that all restaurants, bars, saloons, nightclubs, and beaneries which we frequent shall either

a. Refuse admittance to any women not wearing coats and ties, or

b. Refrain from obstructing the peaceful entrance of any man who is no more undressed than any woman in the joint.

.....
(Signed)

During the first recruiting, I collected endorsements from Errol Flynn, ("Ties are relics of the Dark Ages"), Artie Shaw ("Objector from Way Back"), Ronald Reagan ("With Pleasure"), Preston Foster ("I'm not the type for anything but formal dress but signed gladly anyway"); also from Gregory Peck, John Garfield, Jimmy Fidler, Jimmy Starr, George E. Stone, Jimmy Dunn, Alan Mowbray, George Brent, Sabu, Peter Lorre, John Montague, Bill Prince, Steve Crane, Van Heflin, Bill Holden, Bill Bendix, Robert Paige, and many others.

Perhaps the following response is one of the most quotable:

Dear Mr. Charteris:

I have received your very significant communication in regard to the alarming tendency of certain restaurants toward insisting on the concealment of masculinity. I cannot with clear conscience stand between the public and true masculine beauty.

Being a citizen of England, I do not ordinarily feel privileged to take part in many very worthy domestic movements, but I consider your cause to be of such international importance that the least I can do is give my unqualified cooperation. I am sure this movemen will meet with success, and that we will face the new atomic age with confidence and refreshed beauty, and will look back with gratitude on that embattled but brave little handful of Hollywood men who risked their digestive systems for the cause of sartorial freedom.

Very sincerely yours,

(Signed) Cedric Hardwicke

The response, obviously, was not unanimous. The opposition, however, was surprisingly mild, even from the proprietors of some fashionable eateries of the period, who may have thought it could do no harm to go along with a gag. One notable exception I am bound to quote, if only to prove that I am not afraid to publish arguments against myself:

Under the letterhead of George Murphy, it said:

> I have read the overflow of verbiage signed by one Leslie Charteris and hasten to tell you that I disagree completely with practically all of your whereases, not to mention your therefores. I am quite sure that the thoughts motivating your movement are sound, but have you given any consideration to the consequences?
>
> Did it occur to you for instance what an epidemic of gastritis might be caused by gazing upon a chiffonade salad placed on a white table cloth in the foreground and one of Crosby's Hawaiian shirts for a background? Or possibly try to imagine the gastronomic disruption which might be attained by backing up a fine cut of roast beef garnished with colorful vegetables against a background of some of the shirts and sweaters that Adolph Menjou wears while pursuing his business sideline of clipping the boys on the golf course.
>
> You speak of the exposure of areas of epidermis by the male as performed at beaches and swimming pools as innocent. Apparently you have never spent a hot Labor Day or Fourth of July at Coney Island. There is nothing less conducive to pleasant dining that I can think of at the moment than the thought of gazing at A—— L—— or L—— S—— dressed decolleté for a snazzy luncheon at Romanoffs. If one sat at the same table one would probably think that one was camping in the Maine woods. I hope I make myself clear.
>
> Now, to make my opposition 100% and to consider your thoughts regarding the female wearing coats

and ties. I strongly urge that this not be made mandatory. In fact, there are in this fair city many representatives of this fair sex who should be allowed, in fact urged, to wear as little as possible, even ad infinitum as we say in Gallic.

However out of all this I am sure will come a new slogan which will sweep the country like wildfire: "The most important thing about the salad is the dressing and Vice Versa."

Signed in disaccord,
(Signed) "Murph"

Nevertheless, for consolation I received within the next few days the signatures of Ray Bolger, Vincent Price, and Johnny Weissmuller.

It may well be asked why, with such an auspicious beginning, I let my crusade run out of steam. I'm afraid it only goes to prove that I'm just a dreamer, after all. A lighter of fuses, maybe, but not a bombshell.

From the subject of clothing to the subject of no-clothes seems an eminently apposite transition, so let us make it. And I am speaking literally.

Not the minimum recommended for females by the recalcitrant George Murphy, towards which there has been a minor but much-publicized trend in recent evening fashions, or even the beach modes forecast by an authoritative Italian designer who predicted that within this decade "tops" would be obsolete in feminine bathing costume as they already are for men, but the total nakedness adopted as an organized form of relaxation by a surprising number of northern, western, and basically puritan-civilized people accordingly classed as "nudists".

In the golden ages of ancient Greece and Rome, which have never been branded as eras of cultural black-out, nudity in many public situations was an accepted commonplace; in the rugged Scandinavian northlands it has an almost equally venerable background if casual if earthier acceptance; but the greater part of Europe between—and, in consequence, the Americas to which its emigrants brought their inhibitions in their bag-

gage—was dominated for centuries by a skin-phobia under which "morality" was often governed by the ethics of the barnyard, but exposure of the human body below the neck was an abomination to be expected only of peasants, whores, and aristocrats.

Although I had long since accepted the bared bust as a theatrical attraction (in those days, Flo Ziegfeld, Earl Carroll, and the brother Minsky were experimenting with it in New York, but Englishmen still had to make the pilgrimage to Paris to observe it at the Folies Bergère) it was not until I was hiking through Germany, in the happily energetic and pre-Hitler summer of 1931, that I saw in Munich, displayed on every newsstand as naturally as they would be in Scandinavia today the nudist magazines with full-length unretouched detail which I was used to in Pericles but still strange to in Kodak.

To me, at that age, this was something which obviously had to be investigated further and without delay. From one of the magazines I obtained the address of the secretary of a club in the vicinity and arranged a meeting, at which I introduced myself somewhat inaccurately as a serious-minded English reporter, as a result of which I was cordially invited to spend the following weekend at the camp.

Fortified with the certainty that this would provide a story, perhaps not for a newspaper, but with which I could dominate any flagging conversation for a long time (for in those days nudism as a cult had made very little progress outside of Germany), I duly went there and bared all to see all; and for a young man whose boasted ambition was to sample everything unusual that the world has to offer, it was indeed a priceless experience.

The narrative calendar now jumps some 23 years to a summer in the south of France, when I learned that the Ile du Levant, just a few miles across from the resort where I was staying, was inhabited by nudists—or, as they prefer to be called, naturists. But more than that, and especially intriguing, was the fact that it was not a "colony" or a club, but simply a public place where nudity was officially tolerated by local ordinance. You didn't have to be introduced or join anything, you just paid your fare and went over on the regular ferry, you didn't even have to take any clothes off if you didn't want to, but you would have no legal complaint if you were

shocked by anything you saw.

The friend who has appeared in many Saint stories under the name of Monty Hayward was vacationing at the same hotel, and he had never seen anything like that, but he professed to be sturdily unshockable and highly curious, so we went over together to have a look.

Again it was a rare and illuminating experience, and a useful addition to our anecdotage; although before we had been on the beach very long we were as naked as the most devoted (as proved by their area of sun-tan) habitués. The habitués, obviously, had developed an imperviousness to the stares of the *voyeurs*, who were undoubtedly numerous; but just because of this we both felt a sort of moral compulsion to disassociate ourselves at least in costume from the more conspicuous peeping Toms.

I did not then and have not since become a convert to the faith of Nudism. What this confession leads up to is only that out of the exploratory trip with Monty emerged, eventually, a Saint story titled *The Reluctant Nudist*, which was first published in the *Saint Magazine* and subsequently in the collection THE SAINT AROUND THE WORLD.

As I have often asserted, I have written very few stories which were not documented by my own personal researches, in pursuit of which authenticity I have never spared myself any peril or hardship . . .

Now let the calendar skip another eight years, to a trip I made back to California last winter. Among the good friends I looked up was one Harold Straubing (whom I had not seen since he was with the New York *Herald Tribune* for several of the years during which they were syndicating the SAINT comic strip. Long ago I gave up that kind of strip, at least, while Harold had converted that kind of experience into a supervising editor's job with an outfit which produce (among other things) the highest-class nudist magazines being published in America today, as glossily unretouched as anything I saw in pre-Hitlerian Munich.

Surveying some startling proof sheets fresh off the presses, and having always a weather eye cocked for a buck, I remarked: 'You know, I wrote a story one—"

"I know it," Harold said. "I've read it. I often wondered if there was any way we could use it."

"We could talk it over," I said.

It took a couple of most enjoyable lunches. But I'm not hard to do business with—especially when I'm really interested.

I am no less dedicated than I ever was to the proposition that a writer should only attempt to write about types and places which he knows from personal observation, and is even suspect if he tries to depict situations which he has not seen or lived through in at least reasonable approximation. But this credo, these days, also limits me to some extent, inasmuch as there are finite limits today to how much discomfort I am prepared to endure in order to guarantee my readers the genuineness of some new vicarious background or sensation.

I have become a little too ripe of years to go on boasting that I will try anything, at least or even once.

On the other hand, there is no limit to the satisfaction I can still derive from watching the Saint's adventures disseminate through more media, I hope, than any other fictional character. In the dramatic field, he has now been in feature films, radio, and television: only the live theater has so far escaped, and I am working on that now. In print, of course, he has appeared in about every written language from Japanese to Hebrew, and every reproducible form from comic strips to Braille; he has appeared in every grade of publication, from the slickest family magazines to the most lurid pulps. In 1941 he was worth eight pages of *Life*, with myself playing the part in a picturization of a story which I subsequently published in THE SAINT GOES WEST. And now last year, to close this meandering circle, he made his bid to conquer yet another world as *The Reluctant Nudist* marked his first appearance in one of those nudist magazines by being printed in the Summer, 1964, issue of *Continental Nudist*, together with a flock of gloriously untrammeled photographs among which (I feel bound to anticipate your only disappointment) the sole detail you will not find in an undraped Charteris.

miss plipps considers the cat

by Phyllis Bentley

"BUT CONSIDER the cat," said Miss Phipps earnestly.

"I see what you mean," admitted the sergeant.

It had all begun four days ago. The quiet little fishing village of Poltire was looking its best that morning, and Miss Phipps, lying back in her deck-chair, enjoyed the scene. On the right the noble headland, dark rocks rising into heather-covered slopes; on the left, the tiny pier and the harbour, into which the Poltire fishing fleet was just quietly throbbing its way after its night's toil at sea. In front, golden sands, deep blue water with a pearly frill; children in scanty beach attire showing delicious chubby arms and legs, paddling, digging, jumping, throwing coloured balls, mums and dads in bright cottons, admiring their offspring and energetically striving to keep them out of harm; grandparents with grey hair, very plump or very thin, basking and beaming in the sunshine; ice-cream sellers vending their wares, photographers taking their aim; dogs barking and

Phyllis Eleanor Bentley B.A., Hon. Litt. D. Leeds, F.R.S.L., and one of the most distinguished writers of these times, is the author of THE SPINNER OF THE YEARS (1928), INHERITANCE (1932), A MODERN TRAGEDY (1934), THE RISE OF HENRY MORCAR (1946), THE HOUSE OF MOREYS (1953), O DREAMS, O DESTINATIONS, An Autobiography (1962), etc. etc. The author of THE ENGLISH REGIONAL NOVEL (1942) and of two books on the Brontes, she was the Editor of the Heather Edition of the Works of the Brontes (1949).

racing, bathers of all ages leaping and splashing in the sunny waves.

Miss Phipps observed with her novelist's eye all the infinite variety of human behavior: the pride of the parents, the innocent greed of the children, the close bond of family affection—and its irritation; the tactful grandfathers, the grandmammas who couldn't help knowing more than their daughters about the upbringing of children, but tried (or did not try) to conceal it. The approach of an elderly lady wielding a camera brought a whole new range of emotions into play. The families tried to group themselves with the latest wriggling baby in a prominent position; the honeymoon couples showed shy enjoyment — after all, they were entitled to be photographed together *now*, they seemed to say. The young girls combed their hair and adjusted their bathing suits in critical places; groups of both sexes giggled between embarrassment and enjoyment. On the promenade — low, informal, sand-strewn, just a shore road—which ran along between cliff and beach, the photographer's reception was slightly cooler and more patrician; the objects of her art smiled indulgently but did not move or pose. Indeed one couple strolling nonchalantly along parted at sight of the camera, each stepping suddenly aside, so that the film would record only a vista of sea and cloud between them.

"Not interested," said the man. His tone was curt but calm, an educated speech.

"Naow, thenks," said the girl in purest cockney.

And yet they were handsome enough to have submitted to the ordeal very willingly, thought Miss Phipps: the man dark, tall, arrogant, in middle life, limping (a war wound, probably) with the aid of a silver-knobbed cane; the girl much younger, slender, blonde, of a rare silvery beauty.

"Hard luck. A wasted film," said Miss Phipps sympathetically as the photographer approached her along the shore.

"Oh, well, we must expect that kind of thing occasionally," was the philosophical reply. "After all, they've a right to choose."

Miss Phipps smiled approval. The camera clicked.

"Good heavens, you've taken me!" he cried.

"Prints of all photos taken before twelve are on show in our shop window after two o'clock tomorrow afternoon," said the photographer formally, but with a smile. "The

name is Marris."

"You haven't one of those polaroid, instant-developer, colour cameras, then?" said Miss Phipps sharply.

Mrs. Marris's smile faded. She had been a pleasant comfortable picture as she stood there, plump, her clean faded blue and white dress blowing in the breeze, with curly white hair neat under a net and rather innocent blue eyes, a string of cheap but well-chosen blue beads to match circling her still white and agreeable neck. But now suddenly she appeared vulnerable, perplexed. She turned away almost with a look of sadness.

'No," she said. "I'm afraid —not yet."

Miss Phipps felt ashamed that she had allowed her annoyance at b e i n g photographed with her hair untidy and her dress rucked up to make her unkind to a harmless person whom, at first glance, she had rather liked.

"Tomorrow afternoon," she said reassuringly. "I'll remember."

Mrs. Marris's face brightened.

"I hope the picture turns out well," she said.

"Where is your shop?"

"Up there on the cliff," said Mrs. Marris, pointing. "At the top of that path. Just off the cliff road, The path strikes into it just above the Falcon hotel."

"I'm staying at the Falcon," said Miss Phipps.

"Then you can't miss my place," said Mrs. Marris.

"I'll be there," said Miss Phipps, nodding farewell.

She watched the photographer's progress along the beach for a time, then went in for her swim (delicious), dressed, took a cup of coffee at the shore café under a striped umbrella, and lay drowsily in her chair again. The end of the morning was almost at hand and the families were packing up to leave the shore when a tall, strong, good-looking dark lad clad in a fisherman's jersey and thigh boots came along the beach from the harbour with a string of fish slung over his shoulders. The café proprietor, the deck-chair attendant and the ice-cream stall man all hailed him with a smile or a nod or a wave, calling him Jim in a friendly tone; he was evidently a Poltire native. His dark eyes sparkled, his white teeth shone in his tanned face, as he threw back at them what were evidently jokes cheerfully blue, judging by the response they evoked, though Miss Phipps could not always catch the sense of his dialect. Miss Phipps watched

him idly as he strode along the shore and turned into the steep path up the cliff which Mrs. Marris had pointed out to her. Indeed, there was Mrs. Marris herself, climbing slowly up the path, her blue and white dress unmistakeable in the clear sunshine. Jim quickly reached her but did not pass her by; instead he walked close beside her in the narrow path — it almost seemed as if he had his arm about her waist.

They reached one of the little cottages which stood tucked into the cliff-side — whitewashed, fuchsia-surrounded—and entered by the low door.

'Relatives," guessed Miss Phipps.

She felt almost too sleepy to eat when she entered the small dining-room of the Falcon, the only hotel the village boasted. But thanks to the ministrations of her very pleasant young waiter, a fair, clean, alert lad of kindly manners named Eric, she managed to consume the quite inordinate amount of food which her daily sojourn in sun and sea air seemed to require. At the far end of the dining-room, in a dark corner, she noticed, seated at separate single tables, the handsome pair she had seen rejecting photography on the shore road. It struck her that the man bore a close resemblance to a member of Parliament lately much in the news as a probability for Cabinet rank in the next re-shuffle. She asked Eric if this were in fact the man's identity.

"Several people have asked that, madam, but it's not so. I've enquired," said Eric cheerfully." "That guest' s name is Smith."

Miss Phipps snorted. "Smith" had been used so many, many times as a pseudonym that it might even be the man's real name.

"And that young lady? Very beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, indeed," said Eric, closing one eye to look at her. "Her name is Stenhouse, I believe,"

The next day, beginning brightly but with an uncertain watery gleam, turned soon to a leaden sky and heavy straight-down rain. Miss Phipps was bored. She went down to the harbour and saw the night's catch auctioned—Jim was there helping to move boxes, looking cross.

"It will clear when the tide turns, Miss Phipps," said Eric consolingly at lunch time.

"When will that be?" enquired Miss Phipps hopefully.

"Between three and four," said Eric.

Miss Phipps groaned.

After lunch, all the available seats in the small hotel lounge were filled, and the television set was turned on. Miss Phipps put on rain equipment, and went out.

Halfway up the cliff road she came to the path which led to Mrs. Marris's little house. Its frontage had been modernised with a picture window, most of which was occupied by prints of photographs mounted on cardboard sheets, numbered and rather well arranged in dated and timed rows. Miss Phipps easily discovered her own print. Apart from wild hair and ungraceful dress, for which the photographer was not to blame, the picture gave a rather good representation of the person she imagined herself to be. Miss Phipps paused. An idea had come into her head. Magazines, and organisations to which she lectured, often asked her for "informal" pictures. The present snapshot was impossible, of course, but an arranged snap, herself in an apparently carefree pose on a rock with an ocean background, might be useful. But what a bore! Well . . . Should she? The rain fell heavily. Miss Phipps' glance wandered to the other half of the shop window. Fancy goods — buckets, spades, toy boats, bathing caps, curl rollers, pencils, picture postcards and books, mostly paperbacks—were displayed in surprisingly neat symmetry. Miss Phipps, peering at the paperbacks, glimpsed the title of one of her latest detective stories. At once she lifted the latch of the door and went in.

The little shop was empty, but through an open door in the rear came the sound of quiet movement. Miss Phipps drew out a coin and tapped it, not too sharply, on the counter. At once Mrs. Marris, trim in her blue and white dress and a blue cardigan, emerged.

"Miss Phipps!" she said, beaming. "You've come to order some prints?"

"Well, no," said Miss Phipps. Mrs. Marris's face fell. "Yes, I mean," amended Miss Phipps hurriedly. "I'll have three. But that isn't the main purpose of my call."

She began to explain her idea of an "informal" snapshot, but stumbled over the attempt to explain its purpose without divulging her identity.

"You're Miss Marion Phipps, the novelist, aren't you?" said Mrs. Marris shyly.

Miss Phipps grunted agreement.

"Eric thought you were. He's a great reader, is Eric.

He said you looked just like the picture on the jacket," said Mrs. Marris, nodding towards the paperback, from which Miss Phipps' benign elderly features indeed looked forth in a studio portrait.

"Eric?"

"My nephew. He's your waiter, you know. Of course, he only does it in the vacation," said Mrs. Marris proudly. "He's taking a course in photography really—three years. In London. He's always been very good at photography. My brother was the same. It was he taught me. It will be best for Eric to snap you, Miss Phipps, if we can arrange a time when he's off duty. They have to serve teas in turn, and have a meal and set the tables, as well as waiting, you know. This afternoon is his half-day off, but as it's wet he's gone to the town to see one of these foreign films."

Miss Phipps remarked without quite meaning to:

"But I thought the other young man—a fisherman who accompanied you up the cliff yesterday — somehow I assumed he was your relative."

"Oh, he is! That's my other nephew. Jim. He's two years older than Eric. Eric was born after my brother—"

Mrs. Marris paused. Her pleasant face was suddenly twisted by remembered grief, and tears stood in her kind eyes.

Miss Phipps was touched; she leaned against the counter silent and motionless, trying by a look of sympathy to indicate that she was willing to receive confidences if any should be offered.

"Miss Phipps," she said at length, "would you—I wonder if you would—I am in sore need of advice. May I tell you about it? Will you come in?"

"Gladly."

Mrs. Marris lifted the flap of the counter and Miss Phipps passed through.

"What a wonderful view!" she exclaimed.

The bay windows of the clean, comfortable little sitting-room looked across the wide expanse of the bay to the harbour, dry at present till the tide should flow, with fishing vessels lying there inclined at picturesque angles.

"I lighted a fire, as it was so wet," said Mrs. Marris apologetically. "I thought it would be more comfortable for Ginger Boy."

Ginger Boy, Miss Phipps discovered as Mrs. Marris settled her in an armchair by the hearth facing the bay, was a large handsome marmalade-coloured cat who lay stretched on his side on the hearthrug in an atitude of elegant languor, all four paws

gracefully extended. He opened one green eye to examine Miss Phipps, decided she was harmless and closed it again.

"I'll put the kettle on and we'll have a cup of tea, though it's rather early, if that's agreeable to you, Miss Phipps."

"Tea is always agreeable."

Mrs. Marris disappeared into a small scullery at the side.

"What is troubling you, Mrs. Marris?" said Miss Phipps when she returned. "You can rely on me to tell no-one."

So then the sad little tale came out; sometimes in slow sorrow-laden hesitating words, sometimes in an anguished rush of speed. There was nothing particularly striking about it, reflected Miss Phipps sombrely, just one of those tangles of family relationship which break people's hearts. The Marrises were a good old family of Poltire fishermen; then her brother was very bright at school, passed exams and qualified as a chemist and took a good position in a chemist's shop in the nearest town and married the chemist's daughter and Jim was born and then he set up a little chemist's shop of his own in Poltire—he had just started it when the war came. Of course, chemist or photographer or whatever, being a Poltire man he had never lost his interest in the sea, and so he volunteered for the Navy. Meanwhile his sister, at home in Poltire, had married — a fisherman, of course; and her husband and brother were on the same boat in the Navy—it was arranged locally, as it were, in the early days of the war.

"Minesweeping," said Mrs. Marris.

"Ah," said Miss Phipps gravely. "And so they both—"

"Yes. And my brother's wife couldn't bear it, and died when Eric was born. And so I brought the two boys up. I had no children of my own, you see."

Her voice held so much heartbreak that Miss Phipps looked away. To appear unembarrassed, she put down a tentative finger and stroked Ginger Boy's soft warm head. With immense dignity the cat rose, turned round and lay down nearer to Mrs. Marris's foot. A quick shake of the head, an aggrieved twitch or two of the tail, a rearrangement of the paws, and Ginger Boy put down his head and was asleep again.

"He's a beautiful pussy," suggested Mrs. Marris.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Miss Phipps warmly.

Jim and Eric were good boys, thoroughly good boys, insisted Mrs. Marris, and at the bottom of their hearts devoted to each other, but they grew up with different ideas.

"Natural enough," said Miss Phipps soothingly.

"Yes."

Well Jim, it seemed, grew up like his grandfather, a man of the sea.

"Of course they don't have the old fishing-smacks, with brown sails, like they used to in my father's time," said Mrs. Marris. "It's all these big powerful motor-boats nowadays. It' s Jim's life. But Eric says there's no future in it. That angers Jim, of course. He's mate on one of these boats and wants to marry the captain's daughter."

"If that's what he wants to do he should do it."

"Yes. Now Eric, you see, he's for books and photography. He's won prizes with his photographs, and now he's got this place in a course, in London. He wants to be a press photographer, he says, and travel about all over."

'Well, it's a laudable ambition," said Miss Phipps.

"But the boys can't both do what they want, you see," panted Mrs. Marris.

"Why not?"

"I think the kettle's boiling," said Mrs. Marris. She sprang up nervously and went out.

"We're coming to the crux of the matter," thought Miss Phipps.

She gazed down at Ginger Boy, admiring his sleek beauty. Not venturing to touch him after his previous rebuff, she yet could not resist an oral approach.

"Ginger Boy!" she cooed softly. "Beautiful pussy, aren't you? Beautiful, beautiful pussy."

To her pleasure, Ginger Boy seemed not insensible to these blandishments. He rolled over on his back, displaying to Miss Phipps' delighted gaze his underbelly, its fur pale amber and of apparently delicious softness. Tilting his head round at an extraordinary angle to display his creamy throat and fine white whiskers, he threw up his two front paws, curved them inward and let them hang in the air in a most seductively innocent attitude. He maintained his proud aloofness by keeping his eyes shut, but Miss Phipps thought she spied a line of green beneath his lids.

"My father, you see, was not a man of property," began Mrs. Marris, entering with a teatray.

This part of the story took

a long time to unwind. Miss Phipps bent a patient ear while Mrs. Marris's sad little voice went on and on. The sky began to clear. Ginger Boy, his brief masculine display over, slept comfortably between them. Put in a nutshell, and omitting Mrs. Marris's painful, heartfelt detail of illness, misfortune, all the ills mankind is heir to, the inheritance which came to Mrs. Marris from her family and husband was small indeed, the bringing up of two boys was a struggle, and now that they were grown she had little to give them.

"But why do you want to give them anything?" objected Miss Phipps. "You've kept them all these years. They are grown men now and can earn for themselves."

"James wants a share in the boat, and Eric wants a really good camera. And there isn't enough money for both."

"You have three choices," said Miss Phipps. "Give the money you have, all to James —"

"But poor Eric! To do his work well, get on at his course, and get a good job, you know, he really needs a good camera. A twin-lens reflex, at least."

"Then give it all to Eric."

"But poor James wants to get married. And I feel, I feel," hesitated Mrs. Marris, "that—"

"That it would be better if he did?"

"Well, yes. He's so restless, you know. He's gone off to see her this afternoon. And it makes the boys angry with each other. And each accuses me of favouring the other. They've always been such good friends before. It's very —painful, if you know what I mean."

"You could divide the money equally between them."

"Then n e i t h e r of them would have what they want."

Miss Phipps spoke of banks and loans. Mrs. Marris looked frightened. Ginger Boy suddenly gave an enormous yawn. The shop bell tinkled. Mrs. Marris excused herself and went through to attend to the customer. Miss Phipps rose and went to the window; the sky had cleared, a pale shaft of sunlight struck down the centre of the bay, one fishing vessel came chugging slowly out of the little harbour and steered out into the sun. Others followed. Miss Phipps meditated on the beauty of the seascape and the problem of poor Mrs. Marris—the sum involved, she thought, seemed so small. That love and happines could depend on so little was quite intolerable. Soft fur brushed her ankles, a paw

struck gently at her skirt.

"Ginger Boy," said Miss Phipps mildly, looking down.

She was quite horrified by what she saw. The green eyes gazed up at her in anguish, the cat coiled round and round her ankles in feverish distress.

"Please" w a i l e d Ginger Boy. "Please! Help! Please!"

"Good heavens!" said Miss Phipps, flustered. "But what does he want? What do you want, Ginger dear?"

Unable to speak plainly, Ginger coiled and wailed; the anguish in his gleaming eyes was almost more than Miss Phipps could bear. Mrs. Marris's voice came from the shop, mingled with several others; now that the weather had cleared there was a rush of customers before closing-time. But Miss Phipps could not quite face the notion of interrupting her with a vague plea about a cat.

Ginger wailed.

"He wants to Go Out," decided Miss Phipps with relief.

She looked at the window, but there was a sheer rocky drop below.

"Perhaps in the scullery," thought Miss Phipps.

She entered the tiny neat little room; Ginger Boy followed with a l a c r i t y. She opened the side door. Ginger Boy sat down, and waving his tail angrily, gazed at her with contempt.

"Go out, pussy," urged Miss Phipps.

Ginger B o y ' s answering wail was furious.

"But what *do* you want, dear?" said Miss Phipps in despair, stooping down to him.

Ginger Boy apparently decided to give her another chance. He rose, and lashing his tail, coiled round her ankles, stepping delicately on her feet and wailing.

"Oh, dear!" b e g a n Miss Phipps, but catching a glimpse of blue and white, stood up and perceived that Mrs. Marris had entered the scullery. She l o o k e d surprised and slightly offended at this intrusion. Ginger Boy instantly left Miss P h i p p s and wound round his mistress's ankles. "Oh, dear, I do apologise," said Miss Phipps. "I just thought Ginger Boy wanted to Go Out."

Mrs. Marris's look of offence melted, and she smiled.

"He just wants his supper," she said comfortably. "He always has it punctually at six o'clock, you know. If I'm not here he'll ask anyone. Don't be so greedy and impatient, Ginger." She reached across Miss Phipps to open a small door in the wall which revealed a tiny stone larder. Ginger Boy, pushing rudely

by Miss Phipps, went almost mad with desire as Mrs. Marris lifted out a saucer containing, Miss Phipps observed with a slight shudder, chopped up pieces of very smelly herring. Between tail and wail and greedy paws, Mrs. Marris had a little difficulty in putting the saucer down on the floor, but gently pushed Ginger Boy aside and managed it. Instantly there was silence. Crouching over the saucer, Ginger Boy bent his handsome head and ate with intense concentration. Nothing existed for him in the world but his meal.

"He only has two meals a day," said Mrs. Marris apologetically. "Morning and evening, you know. It's best for him. But naturally he gets hungry."

"And does he always do this wailing ankle act?"

"Yes—it's just his way of asking, you know. I don't allow him in the shop, of course."

"Well, I must be going, Mrs. Marris," said Miss Phipps. "Ten-thirty tomorrow morning for Eric, on the rocks beside the pier. I grieve for you about your problem."

"You won't mention it to anybody?" said Mrs. Marris quickly.

'No, indeed. But I still feel that a loan—"

Mrs. Marris looked obstinate and shook her head.

"Do you mind going out by this door?" she said. "I've closed the shop."

Eric was prompt to his appointment. Now that she knew his background, Miss Phipps observed him with a keener eye. He was, as she had remembered, a pleasant-looking lad enough, though not handsome; tallish, thin, stooping, fair, with a large nose, a serious air, and his aunt's innocent eyes. Her session with him proved rewarding. From his careful attention to detail of light and shade and composition, Miss Phipps perceived that he knew a good deal already about the technicalities of his job; he showed, too, an awareness of the kind of informal photograph suitable for an author of some repute, from which Miss Phipps augured well for his sympathetic understanding of his future clients. He took several pictures of Miss Phipps agreeably disposed amidst rocks. The sun shone steadily, the waves in the background were of just the right size and frequency, and the wind did not blow too hard, so there was some hope that Miss Phipps' hair and skirts would not bulge too markedly in the wrong places.

"I shall probably wish to buy the negative," she said.

"The copyright of course is yours, Miss Phipps," said Eric, "since the photograph was taken at your request."

"And you will charge me for a sitting."

"Well—"

"But of course. Who develops your pictures, by the way, Eric?"

"I do them myself in my off time, or at night. I've fixed a dark corner in my bedroom."

"You've a busy life."

"I like to be busy, Miss Phipps," said Eric, colouring. "Your prints will be ready tomorrow afternoon, as usual."

Miss Phipps longed to mention the camera problem, but was bound by her word not to do so.

"Very good," she said, nodding a cheerful farewell.

What happened to Miss Phipps the following day had often happened before — too often, thought Miss Phipps crossly, stumbling with tired feet down a very steep, stony, narrow and remote lane. Her bouts of preoccupation with the plot of her next story had had their all too frequent result. In a word, after a long walk amongst the mountains, she was lost.

The afternoon was wearing on. Despairingly, she decided to abandon the lane and strike across country towards a distant glimpse of sea. When after a considerable struggle with crumbling walls, tussocks of grass, waist-high bracken, tough heather, spiky thistles, clumps of nettles and unexpected patches of marsh, she at length found herself on a beach some three miles from Poltire, the time was after five o'clock. She walked home by the coast road at a tired but steady pace. She was vexed with herself; the Marris's shop would be closed by the time she reached Poltire, she could not therefore claim the prints of her photographs till the morrow, those nice Marrises would put her delay down to lack of interest and would be hurt.

She was pleased, therefore, to see a light in the Marris window as she passed the entrance to their path. She hurried towards the little house. Her hand was on the latch when the door was suddenly thrown open; she stumbled forward and almost fell into the arms of a large, elderly, grey-moustached sergeant of police.

"Pardon me, madam," said he with stolid dignity: "But may I ask what you are doing here?"

"Me? I've come to inspect the prints of some photo-

graphs which Eric Marris took of me yesterday morning," replied Miss Phipps succinctly. "May I ask why *you* are here? Has there been a burglary or something?

The sergeant hesitated, then stepped aside. The counter flap lay back, open; in front of it, on the floor, could be seen a tumbled heap of blue and white.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Miss Phipps. "Mrs. Marris! Oh, poor thing! No!"

She bounded forward and knelt beside the pleasant woman towards whom she had come to feel very friendly. Mrs. Marris was unconscious, but not, Miss Phipps thought, feeling her feeble pulse rapidly, dead; a tumbled pile of tin buckets beside her showed all too clearly whence she had obtained the deep slowly bleeding cut at the back of her head.

"But can't you do something for her?" cried Miss Phipps. "You can't just leave her on the floor like this"'

"We've sent for the ambulance," said the sergeant. "We're afraid to move her in case she has a fractured neck or spine. We might make things worse, you know."

His "we" was now explained by the arrival, from the private part of the building, of a tall young constable with ginger hair, who looked at the sergeant and shook his head.

"You think she just slipped and fell against the buckets?"

The sergeant was silent.

"She had a bruise on her forehead," said Miss Phipps, gently drawing back Mrs. Marris's curly white hair.

At this moment the ambulance from the neighboring town arrived. It backed down the narrow lane with efficiency and speed; the white-clad attendants sprang out and had Mrs. Marris wrapped in a blanket, loaded on a stretcher, put into the vehicle and driven away, in no time.

"Well," said Miss Phipps sadly, "I'm very sorry, very sorry indeed."

"Could we have your name and address, please?" said the sergeant. The constable whipped out notebook and pencil.

Miss Phipps gave her name, her address in Poltire, her home address, her occupation; she explained her acquaintance with the Marris family, proffered her driving licence as identification, and mentioned her friend Inspector Tarrant in Southshire.

"I have sometimes been allowed to follow his cases," she said.

"Cases?" murmured the sergeant with an interrogative air.

"There is a bruise on Mrs. Marris's *forehead*," said Miss Phipps.

"Yes. Well. Will you accompany me to the police station, Miss Phipps? Just a formality. As you were the first on the scene, you know."

"The first on the scene? But how did you learn of Mrs. Marris's injury?"

"A telephone call."

"At six-eighteen exactly," said the constable.

"From whom?"

"Name of caller not given, though asked for."

"Man or woman?"

"Man."

"Young or old?"

"Might be either," said the sergeant with reserve.

"Has the till been robbed?"

"No. There's no evidence of theft in the shop. I reckon it's a case of a quarrel and a sudden angry blow."

"A quarrel? You don't mean you think it was James or Eric?" said Miss Phipps, speaking out boldly.

"Well, in Poltire we all know the family's been quarrelling," said the sergeant. "They both want her money, you know. I'm sorry, for they're both good lads, but I reckon it must have been one of them. It's not murder, luckily."

"No, no!"

"But it's assault and battery," said the sergeant with gloom.

"Grievous bodily harm," put in the constable.

"I don't believe it," said Miss Phipps. "If it was one of the boys, why should he telephone the police?"

"He was frightened when he saw what he'd done. Afraid she was dead. Knew she needed the ambulance. Daren't give his name.

"When do you think the assault took place?"

"Well that's the trouble, Miss Phipps, that's going to be the trouble, you see. We don't know. If the blow had killed her, now—"

"Thank heaven it did not.',

"Oh, I agree. She was a good woman, was Elinor Marris. But if it had, then we could know the approximate time of the assault. From the condition of the body, you know. Now we don't. And can't. So it's going to be awkward for either of the lads to fix an alibi, you see."

"But why should it be one of her nephews?"

"Who else could it be? No reason for anybody else to quarrel with her. No theft. Unless something has been taken out of all that mess there," said the sergeant hopefully. "But it doesn't look worth it, to me."

Miss Phipps turned to look

at the heap on the floor at the other end of the little shop. It looked as if all the goods in the picture window had been roughly pulled out and hurled to the floor. Boats and balls and buckets and books were entangled to their mutual disadvantage; the cardboard sheets of photographic prints had been crumpled and torn.

"I think it would be well to take all that rubbish down to the station and examine it carefully," said Miss Phipps in a sober tone.

"I was just saying so before you came in," said the sergeant.

This, Miss Phipps felt, was probably not quite true; but she accepted it as a legitimate face-saving gambit.

"Why should James or Eric damage these goods — their own property, really?"

"To make it look like somebody else—a burglar."

"Then why not steal something? But perhaps something has been stolen from the house?"

"Everything is straight there, undisturbed. I've looked," said the constable.

To Miss Phipps, glancing at the red-haired lad as he spoke, an idea occurred.

"Where is Ginger Boy?" she explaimed.

The policemen surveyed her stolidly, uncomprehending.

"Excuse me," said Miss Phipps.

She thrust open the door into the living-room and stepped in.

Ginger Boy, lying prone on the hearthrug with his paws tucked in, turned his head and gave her an uninterested glance, then resumed his contemplation of the fire.

"That cat has been fed," said Miss Phipps with immense satisfaction.

"We've talked to you more than we should, Miss Phipps," said the sergeant an hour later in the neat little Poltire police station. "So I hope you won't take it amiss that we've telephoned Inspector Tarrant of Southstone about you."

"Not a bit," said Miss Phipps cheerfully.

"And he says—just to put you to the test like—we must ask you to tell us the name of his little daughter."

"He has no daughter, large or small!" exploded Miss Phipps. "John and Mary Tarrant have one child, a son, Johnnie, aged four."

The policemen grinned at each other. "That's right, ma'am," said the sergeant cheerfully. "It was just to make sure that you are who you say you are."

"It's most irregular," fumed Miss Phipps.

"Just so," said the sergeant.

Miss Phipps, seeing their point, laughed, and they all resumed their discussion amicably.

"Let me state my case clearly," said Miss Phipps. "James Marris was at the harbour today from five o'clock onwards, helping to prepare his trawler for the night's fishing, since it was to take the tide at six. The tide being an hour later every day—"

"We know that, ma'am," said the young constable. "Us living by the sea all our lives."

"I merely wish to make the point that the fishing fleet left at six today," said Miss Phipps repressively. "Jim was at the harbour from five o'clock onward, as several persons have already witnessed to you. Eric Marris was on duty at the hotel from five-thirty onwards, busy with the waiters' evening preparations—a meal, and setting tables, renewing sugar, condiments and so on—for dinner at seven. Therefore they both have alibis for this attack on their aunt."

"Not necessarily," said the sergeant.

"But consider the cat," said Miss Phipps earnestly.

"I see what you mean," admitted the sergeant. "But—"

"The cat is fed daily at six p.m., and makes the dickens of a fuss if it is not fed punctually," said Miss Phipps. "This evening, at six-thirty, the cat was calm, in a word replete. It had been fed.Therefore, Mrs. Marris was uninjured at six o'clock, the cat's feeding time.

"Not necessarily," said the sergeant. "Either of the boys could have fed it earlier in the afternoon."

"Oh, I see," said Miss Phipps sarcastically. "After hitting your aunt over the head with a cane, you pause to feed a cat which isn't yet hungry."

"Why do you say with a cane?" said the sergeant sharply.

"With a round-headed blunt instrument, if you prefer."

"Here come your photographs, miss," said the constable, as a motor-bicycle could be heard drawing to a stop on the pebbled path outside.

"We don't want the press in on this yet," said Miss Phipps hastily as the sergeant rose.

"Can't help it, miss," said the sergeant stolidly. "But I'll see the young man myself."

"Are you going to say *foul play is not suspected*, or *a man is helping the police?*" enquired Miss Phipps anxiously.

"I don't think we've got as

far as either of those yet," said the sergeant.

"Ah! *The police are investigating.*"

"Just so, miss."

He came back with a large envelope in his hand, containing a bunch of glossy prints of varying sizes, which the editor of the local newspaper in the nearby town had kindly sent, on her request, to Miss Phipps, whose name he knew, from the newspaper's picture library.

Miss Phipps divided them into two heaps according to sex, then spread them out on the table in rows.

"Now," she said.

The sergeant nodded to the constable, who went to the next room. Immediately Eric Marris burst in upon them, flushed and clearly in a rage.

"I must see my aunt at once," he cried. "You've no right to keep me here, Sergeant Farrell. I must go to my aunt. Jim's at sea tonight and can't go to her till tomorrow, so it's all the more necessary for me. She'll be wondering where I am, she'll be worried. You've had me here two hours. I must go to the hospital *now*."

"Mrs. Marris has not regained consciousness yet," said the sergeant. We'll drive you over there in a few moments. First, just take a look at these photographs."

"I did not take any of these," said Eric impatiently.

"Just so. But do you know any of the subjects?"

"That young lady's staying at the Falcon," said Eric, pointing to a picture of the blonde whom Miss Phipps had seen with Mr. Smith. "Miss Phipps asked me her name and I had already enquired because of her photogenic quality—it was Stenhouse, I believe."

Miss Phipps turned the photograph over; the caption on the back told her that the young beauty in question was a fashion model of some slight repute.

"And that's Mr. Smith," said Eric crossly, picking him out from a dozen others. "He's at the Falcon too."

"Tell me, Eric," said Miss Phipps, picking up this photograph and reading on the back what she had expected, for she has asked the editor for a picture of this particular M.P. by his real name—which was certainly not Smith. "Tell me, did you ever photograph Mr. Smith?"

"Yes. Yesterday morning, on my way back home after the sitting with you. He and the young lady were sitting in the beach cafe together, having coffee. They made a good pic."

"Did you speak to them? Did they know you took their picture?"

"No. No. No need. Everybody knows to look in the windows for their pics. I was in a hurry to get back to my developing by that time."

"And that photograph would be on show in your window this afternoon?"

"Of course."

"I think you should interview Mr. Smith, sergeant," said Miss Phipps.

"You can't; he's gone," said Eric.

"Gone!"

"Yes. While I was setting my table I saw him through the window, driving off in a taxi with suit-cases on the front. I heard he'd gone off to catch the evening express to London."

There was a silence.

"Take Eric to the hospital, constable," said the sergeant at length.

"You'll never prove it, sergeant," said Miss Phipps soberly when they had gone. "And I don't think it was intentional. 'Smith' isn't a completely bad man, you know, only arrogant, sensual and vain. It's just a vulgar little intrigue with this pretty, silly girl. Poltire's so small and remote he thought he could get away with it."

"He's married, I see," said the sergeant, reading the caption.

"Yes. I've seen pictures of them together," said Miss Phipps. "She's rather plain, older than he is, I think—and very rich."

"Ah," said the sergeant thoughtfully.

"Eric's photograph of him with the model could plunge him into hot water."

"It could. Particularly if the press got hold of it."

"He's been watching the photographers' windows every day, I guess, and today he saw what he had feared. He had Mrs. Marris take the picture from the board, and tried to buy the negative from her. She said that Eric would get it out for him, she did not know herself just where it would be and hesitated to interfere with Eric's dark-room. This meant delay. Smith lost his temper and flourished his stick threateningly at Mrs. Marris."

"He hit her, remember," said the sergeant gloomily.

"Yes, but I don't think he really meant to do so. It was just a wild gesture. She was alarmed and stepped aside and the stick struck her and she fell back and hit her head on the buckets. He tore up the contents of the window to conceal the empty space left by

his photograph with the model, which he removed. But you'll never prove it. Mrs. Marris and Eric don't know who he is. He will say he's never been here — mistaken identity and all that. The model, silly little thing, will whisp herself off to London tomorrow."

"*You* know the whole thing, Miss Phipps. You could bring him to justice."

"My only purpose in interfering was to clear those two boys."

"You've done that."

"Ginger Boy did that," said Miss Phipps primly.

"Yes, I'm much better. I'm so glad you've come. I want to ask your advice, Miss Phipps," said Mrs. Marris as her visitor sat down beside the hospital bed.

Miss Phipps suppressed a sigh. "Jim and Eric," she said.

"No. This came this morning," said Mrs. Marris, pulling an envelope from beneath her pillow and handing it to Miss Phipps.

The envelope bore a London postmark and was full of five-pound notes.

"Good heavens!"

"Yes, isn't it lovely?" said Mrs. Marris, her innocent eyes bright with pleasure. "I think it's from the man, you know, the man who knocked me down. He didn't meant to do it, I'm sure. Somehow I bumped my head. This is to show he's sorry."

"I hope it'll be a lesson to him," said Miss Phipps auterely. "Do you—do you—remember him clearly?"

"I don't remember anything about it clearly," said Mrs. Marris, perplexed. "Except I remember thinking as I fell: Oh dear, this *is* unfortunate. Now do you think, Miss Phipps, that I may keep the money?"

"You can't do anything else, can you? You don't know where to return it."

"It solves everything," said Mrs. Marris, beaming. "Added to what I have, there's enough for both the boys to have their wish. They can both be happy."

"Well done, Ginger Boy," murmured Miss Phipps.

up on the mountain

by Hal Ellson

Small, gnarled and incredibly withered by the sun, the old man emptied his fourth glass of mescal and went to the door of the cantina to peer up at the nearby mountain whose slopes were miraculously green. Senor Barlow's eyes glittered with the selfsame light that the natives of Flores had noted when he'd first arrived in the village. The mad gringo they called him, but never to his face.

No doubt he was mad. Thirty years of his life wasted on a wild theory that could not be supported by even a fanciful local legend much less proper historical data or archaeological findings. Senor Barlow turned from the door, came back to the bar and Vasquez, owner of the cantina, smiled; four Indians sitting at a table merely watched. "Another mescal before you go up on the mountain?" Vasquez said.

"Another," said Barlow and he lifted the glass when it was filled: "To the treasure of the sacred mountain."

Again Vasquez smiled and glanced at the Indians. "So the mountain is still sacred, hey, Senor?"

"To those who know," Bar-

Death speaks a vastly different language in communities such as this where two ways of life—and of thought—live side by side, with the ages-old memories of the one group inevitably affecting its approach not only to life—but also to death. Another story about Detective Victor Fiala of Montes, last met with in SHADOWS IN THE SUN (SMM., Sept. 1964).

low answered and nodded to the Indians. "Ask them."

But one might address a stone wall as to query that silent quartet. The Indians sat motionless, their dark eyes told nothing. "You ask them," Vasquez said. "See what they have to say."

But Barlow ignored the suggestion and held up a trembling finger. "One more for the mountain," he said, and the Indians arose from the table. Silently they went to the door. Vasquez poured from the bottle, then looked up. The doorway was empty now. A fierce light trembled beyond it. Flores slumbered as it always had, as it always would. Vasquez shrugged; his eyes went to Senor Barlow. The old man was mad but, at least, he provided entertainment and conversation. One thing the gringos were always good for, but few passed through this isolated place and fewer still ever stopped at the cantina.

Who needs them? Vasquez thought, and proceeded to bait Senor Barlow. "Tell me, why do you insist that the mountain is sacred?" he asked.

The old man didn't hear the question, or perhaps he had heard it once too often and now seemed disinclined to answer, for his eyes, set deep in their sockets, were blank. He did not see the pecking hen outside the door, nor the wild white-poppies taunting the sun from the dusty road.

"Senor Barlow . . ."

The blank stare dissolved, the old man returned to life. "Ah, yes. You posed a question which seems unanswerable, and I give you the logic and key to the enigma with a simple counter question: Why does no one live on the mountain?"

"I know why, but you tell me," Vasquez grinned.

"Not because the Indians are too lazy to climb it, as you believe. Not because good crops cannot be grown on its slopes, not because of lack of water, but the priests . . ."

"Ah, we're back on that stuff."

"Centuries ago, who knows when, the command was given by the high priests . . ."

"Ha, and the Indians remember?"

"It has been passed from generation to generation."

"They told you this, I suppose?"

"It is exactly because they did not tell me this that I know."

"And the treasure?"

"That's our words for the sacred objects of gold and silver."

"Which you have never found and never will find be-

cause they don't exist, just as no great Indian civilization ever existed in this region."

"As far as is known . . ."

"Ah, you sound as if you know what no one else does, but the evidence, Senor Barlow. A bit of proof. "Where is it?"

Times beyond counting, Vasquez had asked the same question with a taunting grin and silenced the old man, but this time Senor Barlow grinned back at him, then went to a bench where he had left a tattered duffle-bag. With trembling hands he opened it, turned and came toward the bar, holding on one palm a corroded skull and on the other several arrowheads.

Vasquez was taken back at sight of the skull, but not taken in. "And what does a skull and a few arrowheads prove?" he asked. "Arrowheads are not uncommon in these parts, and skulls . . ." He shrugged.

Carefully the old man placed the grim token on the bar and retained the arrowheads on his trembling palm. "Look carefully," he said, "and then tell me if these are common anywhere."

Vasquez bent forward. "I'll admit they're odd-looking."

"Will you admit they're gold?"

The barman's astonishment brought a cackle from the old man and he withdrew his hand. "Unique, am I right? Ah, allow me to anticipate your question: Why are the arrowheads made of gold? There can be but one answer. They were instruments in a terrible ceremony — and this gentlemen — Senor Barlow nodded to the skull, "I have reason to believe, was the one sacrificed."

"A pretty wild theory, no?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not, but the gold arrowheads?" The old man smiled, and Vasquez nodded. "You found them on the mountain, of course?"

"Where as you claim, no one ever lived."

"At what place . . . ?"

A wild cackle cut Vasquez off. "After thirty years of searching you expect me to share what I've found? No, my friend."

"A skull and three gold arrowheads." Vasquez shrugged. "Do you call that a treasure?"

"Ah, but there's more to be had."

"But you left it there."

"For good reason."

"And what, may I ask, is the reason?"

"The treasure was never meant to be disturbed because the objects are sacred to the Indians. Even what I know already could cost me my life."

Vasquez smiled. "You ex-

pect perhaps a knife in the back from an Indian dead a few thousand years?"

"Oh, no. Vengeance, if it comes, will come from the living. As I told you, these people in the village know more than they pretend."

"Then what about your helper, Pedro? Wasn't he with you when you made your find?"

"He was, but . . ." Barlow tapped his head. "The old fellow's gone up here, I'm afraid. Too much tequila, mescal, pulque . . ."

"Burro! Burro!" The shouted commands broke the silence of the street outside. The pecking hen clucked and ran. Slow hoofbeats and the voice of Pedro Dominquez sounded urging his stubborn charges forward.

Barlow turned to the door and finally Dominquez appeared in front of the cantina astride a woebegone burro and leading another of like character. Dominquez himself was a sorry sight, small, dirty, a mere sack of bones drowned under the enormous rim of a charro hat. Without so much as a glance at the cantina door, he opened his mouth and bawled out, "Senor Barlow, are you ready to climb the mountain?"

"One moment, Pedro," the old man answered. Quickly, then, he went to the bench where his dufflebag sat, placed the skull in it, the arrowheads in a pocket and, with a wave for Vasquez, stepped through the doorway into the sun.

"Burro!" Dominquez shouted, heeling his mount. "Burro!" the old man echoed, climbing upon his own beast, and the slow journey began,

Inside the cantina, Vasquez shook his head as the two men passed from sight. Crazy, he thought. Both of them.

The logic of his belief could hardly be denied considering the subjects and their long senseless searching for a nonexistent treasure. Their madness was equal, one fabricating the delusion and the other sharing it. Vasquez shook his head again, reached for a bottle and stopped his hand, remembering the sombre skull and, more, the golden arrowheads.

What of them? he wondered. The skull proved nothing. Senor Barrow could have picked it up in the desert. As for the arrowheads . . .

He scratched his head, poured himself a drink, scratched his head again and still could not explain the origin of the arrowheads.

A second drink and Vasquez' doubts concerning the treasure began to disinte-

grate. Suppose the old man was right after all? Suppose . . . ? A third drink stirred his greed; a fourth awakened it. Vasquez wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and reached below the bar for his pistol.

The village of Flores was as quiet as a ghost town, but the mountain — a vast and awesome silence embraced it. Even on the gentle lower slopes, Senor Barlow felt this baleful stillness and, as the winding path steepened, as he and Dominquez passed the "line" where the sparse forests of oak gave way to ridge after ridge of sombre ascending pine, the stillness took on a deep sinister weight.

Senor Barlow was not disturbed by this. He had lived with it too long but, still, it touched him and, as always, made him wonder. Cataclysmic agonies had taken place here, convulsing the earth at its dawn, heaving these cliffs and ridges up from the seafloor into the sky and incongruously granting the mountain the unique privilege of a vast covering of verdant green in an otherwise desert area.

Senor Barlow shrugged and closed his eyes. The sun was hot, the mescal warm in his veins; he dozed off. Dominquez was already asleep. The sure-footed burros knew each step of the way.

Three hours later they waded a stream. Before them stretched a plateau; beyond it the mountain like a vast dark tower, raised itself precipitously. A half-mile upward, a fall spilled a roaring white mane of water over a shelf of rock into a boiling pool and raced off in two turbulent cascades. None of this could be seen from the edge of the plateau, and even the thunder of the plunging water could not be heard; stark silence immersed the plateau, then a mourning-dove whimpered, sounding two incredibly soft sad notes, no more, and the stillness deepened.

Senor Barlow slipped from his burro and nodded to Dominquez who sent him a puzzled look. "This is the place," the old man said.

"But, Senor, there's nothing here."

Which was true. They'd crossed the plateau times beyond counting and found nothing, but Senor Barlow was not thinking of the plateau.

"Get off that beast and come with me," he said.

Reluctantly, Dominquez dismounted and followed Barlow downward along the bank of the stream to a point where the edge of the plateau could

be seen to drop abruptly away. Here Barlow stopped and pointed at the vast cliff which curved inward to compose the rough shape of a horse-shoe. Eons ago the cliff had been the spillway for the thunderous falls which had retreated to its present loftier site beyond the plateau. On the face of the cliff a barely discernible line could be seen. Senor Barlow pointed it out and said, "Do you see that path, Pedro?"

"Faintly, Senor."

"And the opening in the cliff?"

Dominquez shrugged. "It looks like a shadow to me."

"It's a cave, and we're going up there."

"Oh, no." Dominquez shook his head violently. "If I know this mountain, there's probably a bear in there. Perhaps a whole family."

His point seemed valid, for at these heights wild turkey, deer and bear were plentiful, but Senor Barlow shook his head. "We're going up there," he said.

Grimly now, Dominquez stared at him and shook his head again. "No, it's too dangerous. One slip and down you go. Besides, the bears. No, Senor."

"You're afraid?" Barlow smiled.

"For you, Senor."

"There's no need to be. I know what's in the cave."

"What do you mean?"

"I was up there yesterday while you slept. Look." Barlow reached in a pocket and produced the arrowheads. "These I found. Thirty years of searching for the treasure and finally . . ."

"Senor, there is no treasure. Don't go up there."

Dominiquez was frightened, and Barlow laughed. "All right, stay here. I'll go alone."

In a last attempt to stop him, Dominquez protested, then gave up and they returned to the spot where they had left the burros. Barlow lifted his dufflebag and turned to see Dominquez tilting a bottle. "Don't drink too much," he cackled and walked away.

The way up the cliff was precarious, an ill-defined torturous path that might trouble a goat, but Senor Barlow was used to such hazards and unafraid. Up above yawned the mouth of the cave and the end of a fabulous search. He laughed to himself and kept climbing — and there below him, without his knowledge, was Dominquez grimly following.

As innocent as Barlow was of Dominquez, so Dominquez was of Vasquez, the cantina-owner, who had followed them

up the mountain and now stood beside the stream where Barlow had pointed out the cave. Watching both men, Vasquez was puzzled. For their own protection they should be climbing the cliff together, he thought, and shrugged and waited and saw Senor Barlow finally vanish within the cave and Dominquez follow some minutes later.

Sitting on his haunches then, he lit a cigarette, anticipating a lengthy interval of waiting but, to his surprise, Dominquez soon re-appeared and started down the cliff. Vasquez followed his descent and waited for Senor Barlow to appear, but the old man did not come from the cave, not even when Dominquez reached the base of the cliff, which was puzzling, but, then, the whole business was, the two men going separately to the cave, the one following the other, and then only Dominquez coming out. It didn't make sense, then, suddenly the parts came together and the puzzle was no longer a puzzle: Barlow had discovered the treasure and, wanting it for himself, Dominquez had killed him.

Thus the sequence of movements and violent finale which Vasquez had failed to foresee and which shook him now, for the gringo was dead and trouble loomed. On the verge of fleeing, he stopped himself.

Now Dominquez was headed upward again, moving steadily toward him. Immobilized, he watched, for the panic that had seized him was gone. Dominquez' act, he saw, as a favor to himself—but Dominquez, too, had to die.

Silence gripped the mountain, buzzards drifted over the valley. Impatiently Vasquez waited and at last heard Dominquez on the slope below him. How long he'd taken. Sweat dripped from Vasquez; his hand went to his pistol. A few seconds more and Dominquez' sombrero would rise above the slope.

"Senor Vasquez."

The voice was soft, but the threat in it was clear. Slowly, rigidly, with his heart thundering doom in his chest. Vasquez turned and there facing him across the narrow stream, two at the water's edge and two at the top of the bank, stood the four Indians who had sat in his cantina that afternoon. Armed with machetes, they moved in on him just as Dominquez came over the slope.

Three months later in the city of Montes, fifty miles north of Flores, Detective Victor Fiala was handed a letter

written by Senor Barlow. Frowning, Fiala read it twice and looked across his desk at a small well-dressed American with wrinkled face and pale blue eyes — the brother of Senor Barlow.

"So?" said Fiala with a faint shrug, "Your brother claims he located some treasure at Flores. A dubious claim, but what is the problem?"

"I haven't heard from him since then, and . . ."

"You think something happened to him?"

"I'm sure something did."

"You have reason to believe this?"

"Yes. I've been to Flores and was unable to find my brother nor learn anything about him. In fact, no one had anything to say except the owner of the cantina, a man named Vasquez."

Fiala smiled faintly. "The people of Flores are suspicious of outsiders," he said. "But what did Vasquez have to say?"

"Very little. That my brother was probably somewhere on the mountain looking for treasure that didn't exist. He laughed, but I had the impression that he wasn't amused nor particularly pleased to see me."

Fiala nodded and tipped back his chair. "I happen to know your brother," he said. "About once a year he comes into Montes, celebrates and finishes the night in jail. We don't hold that against him nor, shall I say, that strange obsession of his that treasure is to be found on the mountain above Flores. A man's entitled to his opinion, but gold and silver there?" Fiala shook his head. "There was never much in this region, and what was here the Spaniards took out long ago. The fact that your brother spent thirty years searching the mountain seems to prove the point."

"Except for this letter," Senor Barlow said quietly, "in which he does not speak of gold or silver mines, but simply of treasure. By that he meant . . ."

"Precious objects of a religious nature left by a vanished Indian civilization of high order," Fiala said, cutting in and adding, "But no such civilization ever existed anywhere in these parts and there is no evidence to support such a claim."

"I know," Senor Barlow answered with a smile, "and I agree with you that my brother was obsessed to an unusual degree by an idea that had no substance in fact, and I, personally, do not believe he actually discovered any so-called treasure. However, he thought

he did and perhaps convinced others. In that case, he could have placed himself in danger — and this may explain his disappearance."

"Your point is well-put," Fiala admitted with a smile, "but the question of one of our people investigating the matter—that lies in the hands of Chief Lopez."

"I know," Senor Barlow nodded. "I've already had the pleasure of meeting him, and it was he who advised me to see you concerning this matter. He also mentioned that, if any one could be of help, you would be the one."

No longer smiling, Fiala nodded and arose from his desk. "If you will please wait," he said and left the office for the Chief's which was located on the upper floor of the Municipal building and facing its tiled courtyard. Actually, this journey was unnecessary. Fiala could have used the phone of his desk to communicate with his superior, but he had a peculiar distaste for the instrument. Now entering the courtyard, he crossed it and mounted the iron stairway with a frown on his face, for it was Sunday and he had expected to enjoy the afternoon at the bullring. Reaching the balcony and the Chief's door, he paused and thought, here goes the bull-fight.

His knock was answered by Chief Lopez and he opened the door. Lopez sat behind his huge handcarved desk, dressed in a business-suit of the finest cut, pale face puffy and dark eyes still misty with sleep — a bad sign to Fiala who nodded and then made known the reason for his visit.

Lopez' response was not unusual. He acted as if deaf, lit a cigar and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. With his eyes still focused there, he finally said, "Well, you spoke to Senor Barlow. What do you think?"

Fiala shifted his weight awkwardly."There's not much to go on. I don't know what to think," he replied and waited while Lopez blew a series of smoke-rings.

"So you don't know what to think?" the Chief finally answered, weighing each word with the usual amount of sarcasm. "Well, Senor Barlow was sent to me by a very old and good friend, which means the matter is to be taken care of."

"I see, and who will . . . ?"

"Who?" Lopez' head snapped forward. With one eye closed and the other glaring, he said, "Were you about to ask me who to assign to the task?"

Fiala bit his lip. "No, but..."

"That's all."

Angry, Fiala turned away and hurried from the office, slamming the heavy door behind him while Lopez smiled to himself. Fiala was too pleasant and easy-going, he believed. But an angry Fiala...

The road from Montes to Flores rolled through a harsh landscape that inspired one only with the wish to escape its monotony and heat. Fiala, stuck with his assignment and still angry, covered the fifty miles at insane speed and only slowed the pace of his car as he left the concrete highway for the dirt road that led to the plaza in the center of dozing Flores.

The plaza was deserted when he reached it, stark empty with only a few scrawny salt-cedars to shade its forlorn benches. Fiala braked the car in front of the cantina, stared down the empty street for some moments, then slipped from behind the wheel and entered the cantina.

Vasquez, the proprietor, alone and dozing at a table, opened his eyes and came instantly alert at sight of the detective who on rare occasions dropped in on unofficial visits. Both men greeted each other and Vasquez went behind the bar to open a bottle of Carta Blanca for the thirsty detective.

No longer angry, Fiala emptied the small bottle of beer in two swallows, nodded for another and emptied half of that one when it came, then allowed it to rest on the bar and looked around the cantina. Powdery white dust covered the floor, flies buzzed in and out both doorways, the oil-lamp stood behind the bar exactly where it always stood, the ancient calendar, yellowing, useless and long-forgotten, still hung on the wall. No, nothing had changed here; throughout the whole village all was the same. The world beyond Flores didn't exist. Fiala thought of teeming Montes with its roaring buses, blaring radios, crowds — and nodded to Vasquez. "Ah, it's so peaceful here," he sighed.

Vasquez sent him an uneasy look and shrugged. "Always, Senor."

"A good place to live."

"And what's wrong with Montes?" asked Vasquez who had not visited there in twenty years.

"It's all right, but changing fast. You wouldn't know it. New buildings, churches, shops, more people. It's all very good, but . . ." Fiala shrugged. "A little too much excitement. When I retire, perhaps I'll come here where it's quiet and nothing ever happens."

Vasquez nodded and opened a bottle of beer for himself, tasted the drink and gazed at Fiala with utterly blank eyes; perspiration welling from the enlarged pores of his face gave his dark skin a luminescent sheen.

Noting this, Fiala finished his beer, and went to the door. The plaza was still empty, blistering in the sun. Not even a bird chirped. No, nothing ever happens here, he sighed and turned. "What about Senor Barlow? He's still looking for treasure on the mountain?"

Vasquez' eyes shadowed perceptibly. Up came the bottle in his hand; he drank greedily, brought it down and shrugged. "But what else?" he said. "The gringo's madness stays with him."

"He's in the village at present?"

"No, Senor. Up on the mountain."

"I see. And when did you see him last?"

Vasquez frowned and shrugged again. "Who knows? I don't keep tabs on him."

"Was it a week ago?"

Another shrug and the sweat gleamed on Vasquez' face, the soft fat of his neck. His thick chest heaved; he looked in pain. "Who knows? In Flores one doesn't keep track of time. It could have been a week ago."

"Or perhaps a month?"

Vasquez' mouth opened and snapped closed.

Slowly he splayed his hands in an unwilling gesture of semi-confirmation.

"Or perhaps you have not seen Senor Barlow in the past three months," Fiala said, moving from the door to the bar and leaning over it so close to Vasquez that he could separately define the drops of perspiration on his face.

Futilely, Vasquez turned to the useless calendar on the wall, then faced Fiala again, his eyes brimming with terror. "I don't know," he answered hoarsely. "Perhaps."

"I see." Fiala relaxed and returned to the doorway. From there he looked out at the deserted plaza. The place where nothing ever happens, he thought. But, at last something had. It was all too obvious in Vasquez' lies and terror.

Slowly he returned to the bar, picked up his empty bottle and tapped with it softly, saying, "Three months is a long time for an old man like Senor Barlow to stay on the mountain. Perhaps he died up there?"

"Perhaps," said Vasquez. "He could have fallen from a cliff, or a bear may have mauled him. Who knows what

"You never was interested in finding out, of giving him a respectable burial?"

Vasquez dropped his eyes. "The mountain is big, Senor. It would be a difficult search. Besides, the buzzards would find him first. There was no point in searching."

"And Senor Barlow never found the treasure?"

"What treasure? The gringo was crazy. There is no treasure."

"But did he ever say he found it?"

Vasquez hesitated, then shrugged. "Who knows? Who listened to him? He was always talking of treasure, nothing else. Years ago I stopped listening to his madness."

"Then he may have said he found it?"

"He may have. I don't know."

"The last time he was here was any one else present?"

Vasquez frowned. Those four silent Indians who had sat at the table he could never forget, but mention them? He shook his head to Fiala. "No. No one else was present, Senor."

Why did he hesitate so long? Why does he look so frightened? Fiala wondered and, leaning across the bar, said, "When a man's words are all the truth it's simple to deal with him; like-wise, when a man's words are all lies, but when one like you salts the truth as you have . . ."

"But, Senor, I have not lied."

"Stop. Another one like that and I'll throw up, but before I do . . ." Fiala let out his breath. "Let me explain. First, I am an easy one to deal with, but if you are brought to Montes and questioned by the others, you know what to expect. Second, I know more than you think I do, and what I don't happen to know, I'll soon dig up. As for the treasure, let me inform you that Senor Barlow thought he discovered it. He made that known in a letter to his brother, which is why I am here."

Vasquez shrugged. "But if there is no treasure . . . ?"

"That's beside the point. Senor Barlow believed he found it and, no doubt, he talked about it because he liked to talk and liked to drink. If he drank, he drank in here and, if he talked, he talked in here—and someone believed him and murdered him." At this point, Fiala paused, allowing his words to sink in, then resumed and finished off in a voice barely above a whisper: "Have you anything to say now?"

"Nothing, Senor."

Fiala smiled, but not pleasantly. Anger smoldered inside him again and threatened to erupt, but that wouldn't help, for Vasquez was frightened. But why? What did he know? Shaking his head, Fiala glanced at his watch now. Ten minutes of four, but time, like the yellowed calendar on the wall, was useless here, a dimension which recorded nothing but depthless vacuity, stagnation and silence — that silence which was thickening in the plaza, spreading through the dusty streets, creeping into the cantina.

Nine minutes to four now— in crowded Montes. Back in the noisy city the stands at the Plaza de Tores were almost filled, the bulls waiting to be prodded into the arena, the matadors praying in the chapel. A bottle of Carta Blanca and a good seat. The ticket was in Fiala's pocket.

Almost in pain he grimmaced and shook his head. If Vasquez would not talk here... "All right," he said quietly, "my car is outside. Lock up. I'm taking you to Montes."

Montes was only a memory to Vasquez, a bad one at that as far as the law was concerned. "Wait," he cried, drawing back from the bar.

"You have something to say?"

"Yes. Senor Barlow spoke of finding treasure on the mountain top the last time he was here, which was three months ago."

"And you never saw him afterward?"

"No, Senor."

"Were you interested in the treasure?"

"Never."

"And you didn't follow Senor Barlow up the mountain."

"No."

"And no one else did that you know of?"

"Why should any one when no one ever believed the crazy gringo?"

Fiala shook his head, glanced at his watch. With the hands dead-set on four, from the Plaza de Toros at Montes across the desert the ghostly notes of a trumpet floated to him. Silence followed; he closed his eyes and a red door opened for a black angry bull that plunged into the arena under a thunderous greeting. The mirage faded and Vasquez' face came into focus again, lies dripping from him in his sweat, the terror still trapped in his eyes. Fiala doubled-up his fists, caught himself and made one more effort: "What about Pedro Dominquez?"

"Pedro Dominquez?"

Empty bottles suddenly flew from the bar, broke and scat-

tered across the floor. Again, Fiala caught himself, and both men stared at each other while the silence, fragmented by the breaking of glass, crept steadily into the cantina. Finally Fiala spoke: "Now we'll begin again. I mentioned Pedro Dominquez, Senor Barlow's helper for thirty years. You know him?"

"I know him."

"Did he go up on the mountain with Senor Barlow?"

"As far as I know, he always went with Senor Barlow."

"Did he go that last time?"

"That I don't know, Senor. I never kept tabs."

"But you assume he did?"

"Yes."

"I assume the same. Now did Dominquez return?"

"He is here in the village."

"And he never mentioned Senor Barlow's absence?"

"Never, and I never asked."

"You weren't inquisitive?"

"Not with Dominquez. He's as crazy in his way as the gringo. Ask him the wrong question and he'll throw his glass in your face and follow with the bottle."

"Do you think he killed Senor Barlow?"

Vasquez' denial, his simple constricted "No", fell with a dead-flat note and articulated his terror as sharply as a stabbing scream to Fiala who stepped back and nodded. The inquisition was over. For the moment, he was satisfied.

"Another chico," he said, and Vasquez opened another bottle for him, then one for himself.

Five minutes later, on a nameless dusty unpaved street two squares beyond the plaza, Fiala stopped his car before a crumbling adobe house that appeared deserted. Climbing out, he went to the weather-beaten door, knocked and pushed it open. Light came through a doorless opening at the rear of the single room, more sifted through the rotted ceiling, enough to reveal the interior, the rough crucifix hanging from a nail on the far wall, a crude bench and a palette of straw where lay Pedro Dominquez with an empty bottle.

"Senor Dominquez."

One eye opened in the creased leathery face of the old man, blinked then brought the detective's dim figure into focus. "Yes, Senor?"

Fiala introduced himself, made known the reason for his visit and Dominquez sat up. As the old man clasped his legs with his horny hands, Fiala realized this wouldn't be the same as questioning Vasquez, he had to speak directly, make his point quickly.

Even then the Indian might resort to silence and meaningless shrugs. Thus he began by speaking of Dominquez' long association with Senor Barlow in a search for treasure, that they always went together, that some months ago both went up the mountain and only he, Dominquez, returned.

"Why did you return alone?" asked Fiala.

"Because we argued," Dominquez replied.

"About what?"

A shrug. "Who knows?" Senor Barlow was drunk. I was drunk. That's all I know."

"Where is Senor Barlow now?"

"Up on the mountain."

"Dead?"

"Why should he be dead?"

"Because he found the treasure he was searching for."

"No, Senor. He couldn't find what was never there." Dominquez tapped his head. "The gringo was crazy."

"If that's true, why did you follow him for thirty years?"

"Because it was work, Senor. Easy work, better than following a herd of goats in the desert or gathering wood. Ei, and the gringo paid for all the drinks."

Fiala had the impression that the old fellow was laughing at him and slipping away; he had to strike now and hard. "You were the last man to see Senor Barlow alive," he said, sharpening his tone. "You know he found the treasure and you argued with him and murdered him in cold blood."

"And how do you know all this?" Dominquez asked quietly.

Nothing elicited, neither a sign of guilt or guilty statement, but Fiala had anticipated this and tried again. "Vasquez," he said, dropping the name like a weight. "Your friend from the cantina told me."

Silence swelled in the room and pressed on it from without; two like-forces in tenuous balance edged toward a moment of violent explosion. Fiala tensed and readied himself, seeing the spark of anger ignite in Dominquez' eyes, his swift glance at the bench where a rusty machete lay. But the explosion never transpired, the light faded in Dominquez' eyes. A shadow veiled them. He spoke with a changed voice, stonily, certain: "Vasquez never said that. Those are your words, Senor."

Silenced, Fiala went slowly to the door, glanced back, saw the old man sitting motionless in the vague light and turned away. Back in his car, he still saw Dominquez' face. The old man knows something, but what? he thought, and drove

off, passing through the plaza, the village and on into the desert.

The sun was just setting when the car stopped outside the cantina again. Two old men sat on a bench across the street in the plaza. For them the car didn't exist. but inside the c a n t i n a . . . Vasquez gulped a drink and came to the door. "All right, let's go, said Fiala.

Without looking up, Vasquez came down the two steps, walked to the car and opened the door. "You're taking me to Montes?"

"Yes, get in."

Vasquez slid into the seat and closed the door.

The last flames of the sun were burning out across the desert as the car headed for Montes. The bullfight's over, thought Fiala, shaking his head. He had nothing to say to Vasquez who sat like a dummy. Rising and falling, the road slipped away under the wheels of the car in a darkening ribbon. Shadows were stalking the landscape, night closing in; suddenly the desert turned black.

"How far to Montes?" asked Vasquez.

"Forty-five miles," Fiala replied, thinking of his daughter at the supper-table, his friends in the Black Cat, drinking and discussing the bull-fight.

"How far to Montes?" Vasquez asked again.

"Forty-one miles, but you may never reach there."

"Why not, Senor?"

Fiala didn't r e p l y, but braked the car and slowly reached for his cigarettes. He offered one to Vasquez and Vasquez refused. A match flared. Fiala lit up, smoked, shot the cigarette away and said abruptly, "Dominquez accuses you of killing Senor Barlow."

"No, he never said that!"

"Why wouldn't he?" Fiala asked, surprised by the violence of the reply, but now Vasquez sat silent. Fiala spoke again, and again received no reply. Frightened, he thought, and reached for his pistol. "Vasquez, I have a job to do."

"And you believe you are doing it."

"I have a difficult boss. He expects much from me and makes no allowances, which forces me not to make any. Perhaps you understand. Perhaps you don't, but this should help."

Vasquez shivered and sat still as the gun touched his temple. "Now the truth," Fiala continued. "If I don't get it, you know what will happen. It's very simple. I'll explain that you tried to run.

Who will doubt me?"

Silence. Then Vasquez broke and began to speak. Quickly he described what had happened on the mountain, watching Senor Barlow and Domnquez climbing separately to the cave on the cliff, Dominquez coming out alone.

At this point, he paused. Fiala ordered him to continue. "I waited for Dominquez," Vasquez went on. "I intended to kill him and take the treas- from the cave."

"But you didn't kill him."

"No. Four Indians were in the cantina when Senor Barlow was drinking that afternoon. They followed me up to the mountain and stopped me . . ."

"Then what?"

"They knew about the cave and wanted to kill me. Dominquez was merciful. He stopped them, and I swore to keep silent about the cave and Senor Barlow."

Fiala put away his pistol, started the car and turned it about when Vasquez seized his arm. "You can't take me back there," he cried.

"Unfortunately I have to," Fiala answered. "You see, I still don't know the truth."

"But I swear to the Virgin that I've told it."

"You've also told too many lies. Now take your hand off my arm."

Slowly Vaquez released his arm and the car moved forward faster into the vast black veil of night.

"You'll have to be careful," Vasquez said.

"I assure you, I am always careful," Fiala replied. "How far is it up the mountain?"

"Three hours on the back of a burro to the plateau, then a half hour by foot to the cave."

"We'll need four burros."

"Four, Senor?"

"One to carry Senor Barlow's remains."

"There's probably nothing left of him but bones."

"Four burros, a rope, blanket, flashlights."

"I have two kerosene lamps."

"They'll do. Are you ready?"

"Yes, Senor."

"A half hour from now I'll meet you on the other side of the village."

Vasquez nodded, slipped from the car and moved off in the dark. Fiala waited, then followed. Ahead of him the tiny village lay silent, with hardly a light showing. A dog barked and slunk away as he entered the plaza and stopped.

A hard object thrust into Dominquez' ribs brought him awake and blinking into the

flame of a match. "Get up," Fiala ordered.

Confused, the old fellow arose. "A wrong move and you'll regret it" Fiala warned.

"You're arresting me?"

"We're going up to the mountain."

"For what, Senor?"

"You'll have that answer when we arrive there." The match dimmed and went out. The hard snout of the pistol urged Dominquez toward the door. "Walk ahead of me," Fiala ordered.

Beyond the village and a small stream that skirted the base of the mountain Vasquez waited with the four burros. Finally two shadows emerged from the night. "Senor Fiala?" A note of panic echoed in Vasquez' voice. "All's well," Fiala answered. "You have everything?"

"Everything, Senor."

"Good." Quietly Fiala issued his commands: Dominquez to ride the lead burro, Vasquez to follow, himself in the rear. The men took saddle and with kicks urged forward their sleepy mounts toward the enormous shadow of the waiting mountain.

A half hour passed and Fiala halted the small cavalcade, passed cigarettes to Dominquez and Vasquez, lit them and lit one for himself, then suddenly shivered for an icy chill was settling over the mountain.

"A drink, Senor?" Thoughtfully Vasquez had brought a bottle of mescal. He passed it to Fiala. Fiala drank deeply, gasped, handed it back to be passed on to Dominquez who took his fill, and once more they moved upward against the descending chill, the dark and a vast avalanche of ever-deepening silence.

Two and a half hours later the burros splashed through a shallow swift-moving stream and mounted the opposite bank. "Here," said Vasquez, halting the cavalcade.

Somberly glowing with a faint phosphorescent light the plateau lay before them, while beyond it stood the dark towers of the mountain. The three men gazed at both, then slowly dismounted.

"From this point we go on foot," said Vasquez.

Cigarettes were lit, then the lanterns and Vasquez led the way downward along the stream-bank, stopped and pointed across the abyss toward the dark edge of a horseshoe cliff. "The drop of the old waterfall," he explained. "The cave is half-way up. A stiff climb."

Fiala nodded and shivered in the chill air.

"A last drink, Senor?" Vas-

quez handed him the bottle; he drank and passed it on to Dominquez. Dominquez took a nip, then Vasquez lifted the bottle. Fiala started to turn away and, in that moment, Dominquez lunged. Too late, Fiala wheeled and saw Vasquez, with the bottle still tilted, toppling backward with a knife in his chest.

From that moment when he stepped from his car into the dark near the village far below Fiala felt he had entered a nightmare; the long climb up the mountain had heightened the feeling and now the dull thud of Vasquez' body striking the earth was conclusive proof. In a moment I'll wake, he thought, but there lay Vasquez, dead and already transfigured by the ghastly pallor of the dead—and there stood Dominquez. Fiala gaped at him and at last found his tongue. "Why?" he asked.

"He gave his word and went back on it," Dominquez answered like one in a spell, then picked up a lantern and started forward.

A half hour later Fiala and Dominquez reached the mouth of the cave, paused there, then moved in and paused again. Even in the meager light of the lanterns Fiala saw that they had entered a cavern of enormous proportions. Patiently Dominquez w a i t e d, then moved forward and upward over a floor of damp limestone and p r e s e n t l y halted and raised his lantern, flooding a pale raised area that resembled a circular altar in the center of which lay a skull, some bones, a duffle-bag and a withered corpse.

"Senor Barlow," Dominquez said, pointing at the corpse.

"And the other?"

"Probably some one like Senor Barlow who came looking for treasure long ago," Dominquez a n s w e r e d, approaching the skull and stooping. Rising, he turned and held out a palm on which lay three arrowheads.

"This was what Senor Barlow found here. Nothing else," he said. "I took them back from him when I killed him, and I killed him because he violated this sacred place."

"Sacred place?"

"Yes, there is no treasure here, but look."

Dominquez turned, swung the lantern and Fiala moved closer, then stopped, for beyond the raised area, the floor of the cavern dropped precipitously, forming a huge shadowy crypt.

"The place of the dead," said Dominquez and Fiala, peering down, saw a pit full of skulls.

bed-time story

by Robert L. Fish

"Daddy, tell me a story," said my little daughter, Cathy.

"What kind of a story?" I asked curiously.

"A romance-suspense-spy-adventure story," she said, and clambered up onto my lap, settling down.

I smiled at her indulgently. "All together?"

Cathy considered. "Well," she said, carefully avoiding my eyes, "if you want you can tell me four stories; one a romance, one a spy story, one an adven—"

"All together," I said hastily. I studied the wall a minute, thinking. "Well, once upon a time there was this G-Man . . ."

"What was his name, Daddy?"

"Claude. Anyway, he was in this cellar in East Berlin which was the headquarters of General Oskpovnikov, chief of the dread OGPU . . ."

"How did they catch this G-Man, Daddy?" Cathy asked, wriggling deeper into my lap.

"They hadn't caught him!" I said indignantly. "He was there on purpose, posing as a Red spy. Although, to be truthful, this General Oskposnikov had begun to have certain suspicions of Claude . . ."

Last year (SMM, June 1964) we brought you Robert L. Fish's somewhat irreverent variation on one popular approach to this genre. And now—with equal solemnity—the author of the superb S&S novels about Da Silva tells us a bed-time story—a bed-time story in that heroic and thoroughly plausible manner (well—almost plausible . . .) we know these days. . . .

"Because he caught him eating with a fork and he changed hand?" Cathy asked, her eyes wide.

"Not exactly," I admitted. "Actually it was because he was the only one in spy-headquarters who had a picture of Nina Khruschev for a pin-up. Anyway, as I say, this General Oskpovnikov was suspicious, but he didn't know how to test Claude until one day they caught Claude's secretary, a girl named Desdemona, listening at the cellar door. They didn't know she was Claude's secretary, of course, but they did know she was working for the CIA because they found papers in her purse . . ."

"How did they catch her, Daddy?"

"She was leaning against the door and it wasn't locked and she fell in. Anyway, before Claude had left on his assignment he had specifically told her to go back to Washington, or get lost, or something . . ."

"Why, Daddy?"

"I imagine so she wouldn't get caught and be used in a test against him," I answered, pleased with my ready wit. Cathy seemed to accept this, so I went on. "Anyway, she didn't go back to Washington, but instead she traced him to this cellar and she was listening at the door when it opened and she fell in. So they grabbed her and searched her, and then the General had a great idea. He said to Claude:

" 'This girl is a member of the infamous Wall-Street gang called the CIA, and if you want to prove you are a dedicated Communist, here's your chance. Take this Schnauzer '89 and shoot her through the head . . .' "

"Was Desdemona Claude's girl-friend, Daddy?"

"According to the pay-roll lists," I said, "she was just his secretary. But actually, she was. They had met in Portsmouth, Ohio, while on a mutual assignment and immediately fallen madly in love. Anyway, Claude took this gun . . ."

"Was it loaded, Daddy?"

"All eight barrels. Anyway, Claude took this gun and as he approached Desdemona in that dark cellar she looked up at him with all of her love pouring from her blue eyes, and Claude cocked the Schnauzer '89 to bring the first cartridge into the barrel, put it against her forehead, and..."

"He didn't shoot her, did he, Daddy? Not really?"

"If you'll quit interrupting," I said a bit testily. "Anyway, so Claude cocked the gun, placed the nozzle against her beautiful ivory-colored

forehead, and pulled the trigger . . ."

"It wasn't really loaded, was it, Daddy?"

"Why, yes," I said, pleased at the thought. "It was."

"But he missed, didn't he, Daddy? He didn't really shoot her, did he, Daddy? She's really alive, isn't she? She'll marry Claude, won't she?"

"No, honey," I said. "She's dead. Face up to it. So, anyway, this General Oskpovnikov lost all suspicion of Claude and let him go to Moscow, where he was supposed to go all along in order to fulfill his assignment . . ."

"You mean he really did shoot her and she's dead?" Cathy began to cry. "That's not fair!"

"Fair? What's fair?" I asked, patting her heaving shoulders. "If he told this Desdemona once he told her a thousand times to quit following him around when he was on assignment." Cathy's sobs increased. "Anyway," I added hastily, "don't worry about her. She was really a Red spy herself who had been planted in Portsmouth as a young girl . . ."

Cathy's face revealed her doubts of this explanation. "Of course," I said hurriedly, "they meant to plant her at the Naval Station in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, but she took the wrong train by mistake. You see, honey, she never was too smart . . . Anyway, when the authorities found out that General Oskpovinkov had been stupid enough to have one of their own people shot, he was sent . . ."

"To Siberia, Daddy?"

"Right!" I said, pleased to be able to agree. "To East Bondurski, Siberia, where it is always three hundred degrees below zero and the people all live on frozen sea-weed, those that have ration coupons. Anyway, about Claude, he finally managed to get to Moscow. And once he was there he proceeded to put into effect Plan 26, which were his instructions from the CIA in Washington . . ."

"What was he supposed to do, Daddy?"

I looked at her with amazement. "You know better than that, child," I said sternly. "CIA instructions are a secret, generally. If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, would it?"

Cathy giggled. "It's only a story, Daddy," she reminded me.

"Why, so it is!" I admitted. "Well, if you promise not to spill it to the whole third-grade, I'll tell you. He was there to kill Stalin. And in order to do so, the first thing

he had to figure out was how to get into the. . ."

"Ho!" Cathy snorted. "That stupid Mrs. Westerville!"

". . . the Kremlin. That stupid who?" I looked at Cathy. "Mrs. Westerville? Who on earth is Mrs. Westerville?"

"Our stupid teacher," Cathy said. "She said that Stalin was dead."

"Of course Stalin's dead," I said patiently. "Claude's job was to kill him. Haven't you been listening?"

"Oh!" Cathy frowned. "Claude really killed him?

"I haven't heard a better version yet," I said. "Anyway, in order for Claude to get inside the Kremlin he needed keys, of course, because they keep the Kremlin tightly locked, especially at night. And here I'll admit he was just plain lucky, because just when he had run out of ideas on how to get in, he met this girl . . ."

"Was she beautiful, Daddy?"

"Some may have thought so," I said. "Personally, she was a bit too chunky for my taste. But anyway, she happened to have keys to the Kremlin b e c a u s e, oddly enough, her job was making keys, and just that morning one of the gate-keepers had lost his keys and they had to send out to the corner to have some spare keys made, and anyway she had just finished making them and was polishing them when Claude dropped off a streetcar in front of her little kiosk, and there was something about him that struck her fancy, and . . ."

"Like Liz Taylor and Richard Burton, Daddy?"

"More or less," I said.

"Like Mrs. Westerville and that goopy Mr. Jamison?"

"More like Liz Taylor and Richard Burton, I imagine," I said.

"Like you and Mommy, Daddy?"

"Now you've got it," I said approvingly. "Anyway, before many hours had passed Claude had a full set of keys to the Kremlin . . ."

"Did Claude take her back to the United States and marry her, Daddy?"

"He couldn't," I said regretfully. "She was already married and had four children. Key-makers marry young in Russia, honey. Anyway, once it was dark enough, Claude opened the front door of the Kremlin and went in. Then he sneaked up the steps . . ."

Cathy was tired, but not too tired to correct me. "Snuck, Daddy."

"Snuck, then. He snuck up the steps inside the Kremlin, found Stalin's study, and

burst in. There wasn't anyone there except Stalin, who was drinking vodka, and before Stalin had a chance to even offer Claude a drink, Claude had his trusty Schnauzer '89 in his hand and wham-my-wham! But before he could get away the door burst open and in came the Captain of the Guards, Ivan Schostokovtich, and he had Claude by the throat in a split second!"

"They didn't hang him, did they, Daddy?"

"With the rope shortage in Russia?" I scoffed. "They put him in a dark cell full of rats that night, and early the next morning they brought him out of his cell and put him in front of a one-man firing squad, and do you know what?"

"I bet it was a FBI man, really, wasn't it, Daddy? The firing-squad man, I mean."

"No."

"A CIA man in disguise?"

"No."

"It wasn't . . ." hopefully, ". . . Desdemona?"

"If you'll let me get a word in edgewise," I said, "it was Captain Schostokovitch himself, who, in addition to being the best shot in the U.S.S.R., was also the husband of the little key-maker, and he didn't like his wife making keys for strange men, or even talking to them. But when Claude was standing up against the well, and Captain Schostokovitch had his Schnauzer '89 raised and aimed, Claude lifted his hand . . ."

"To ask for a cigarette, Daddy?" Cathy yawned deeply.

"To salute. Claude didn't smoke. And while his hand was still in the air, Captain Schostokovitch fired and Claude fell down dead. But after all," I added quickly," he did fulfill his assignment, and today in the halls of the CIA in Washington there is a plaque to the memory of Claude, done in etched bronze with silver trim . . ."

"Gold, Daddy."

"You're probably right. And that's the story of Claude, and how Stalin really died."

"It was a keen story." Cathy yawned again and settled down on my shoulder. "It would make a good movie, Daddy."

I stared at her. "You mean it hasn't already?" I asked, amazed.

But Cathy was already sound sleep.

the gambler hated rats

by J. Jefferson Farjeon

IT DID NOT happen to me—I am not sorry to say—and it was by the merest chance that I heard of it at all. It was told to me very early on the morning after the event, in the waiting-room of a small Devonshire station.

I had arrived at the station with some twenty minutes to spare, and I had imagined that the twenty minutes were going to be pretty dull. The trains that stopped here were few and far between, while the little platform was one of those featureless, dead platforms that offer no form of entertainment to anybody.

At first I thought it was empty. The assumption was natural, for two people in this isolated spot savoured of a crowd, and the other occupant I joined made no movement as I went in, or sign that he had noticed me. Even when I noticed him—he was seated in the one shadowed corner—he paid me no attention for several seconds, but continued to stare, motionless, at a half-sheet of paper in his hand. Beside him, on the hard bench, was an opened envelope from

John Jefferson Farjeon, the son of the noted British novelist, Benjamin Leopold Farjeon, was himself a distinguished novelist and playwright, a frequent contributor to Punch, and the author of 80 novels including GREENMASK (1944), DEATH OF A WORLD (1948), BACK TO VICTORIA (1947), THE DOUBLE CRIME (1953), etc.

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which apparently the paper had been extracted.

Something tightened in me as I noted the man's expression. It came clearly to me, even through the shadows; it was the expression of one who had just received a pretty big shock. Well, in that case, perhaps the kindest thing to do would be to make some commonplace remark and then leave him to it. But before I could act on this thought he suddenly looked up and saw me, and as though divining my intention, exclaimed quickly,

"Don't go!"

I took the bull by the horns by asking,

"Sure?"

"Quite sure," he answered. "I want someone to talk to—and you look the kind I want."

"I'll try not to disappoint you," I said.

He took up the envelope, slipped the half-sheet he had been reading into it, pocketed it, and motioned me to the now free place beside him.

As I sat down, he inquired, "How long have we got?"

"I've got about eighteen minutes," I replied. "I don't know about you."

He nodded. "That'll do. What I want to tell you is about the night I've just spent. I don't think it'll bore you."

I made no comment, but felt quite sure it wouldn't.

"Yesterday evening—late—I got lost," he went on. "I'd been delayed leaving the place I was staying at, and I was actually making for this station, meaning to catch the last train.

"In my anxiety I made the fatal mistake of trying a short cut across the moors. I walked into a mist and that finished my chance. I ended up in a barn in the middle of God knows where!"

He paused, and to fill the gap I said, "Yes, I know what it's like. I've got lost myself. And what did you find in the barn? A dead body?"

My suggestion startled him, but he smiled a moment later.

"Oh, nothing like that!" he answered "I found a live one. And I'll never forget that queer first sight of him! He was sitting on an upturned tub. Before him were two upturned barrels. There was a candle on one of the barrels, and playing-cards on the other.

"He turned as I came in, and the candlelight flickered not only on his unshaven face but on the card he was holding up in his hand, as though just about to place it. It was the nine of clubs. That isn't important, but I just mention it to build the picture. Him

sitting there, and the candle, and the nine of clubs."

I got the picture. It added to my picture of the narrator himself, as he had looked in this waiting-room when I had entered it, staring motionless at the half-sheet now back in his pocket. But the narrator was no longer in the waiting-room. He was back in the barn. And I was very nearly there with him.

"It may sound comic," came his voice again. "But it wasn't, and you'll understand the feeling I got about that when I've finished. He was the first to speak.

" 'Oh, it's you, this time, is it?' he said.

" 'Who was it last time?'

" 'A rat,' he said. 'If there's one thing I bar, it's rats!'

" 'Then I suppose the only reason you've chosen a barn for the night,' I said, 'is because you've got lost, like me?'

" 'You've said it, chum,' he answered. 'You've said it! But now it'll be two to one, next time the bloody thing pokes its nose out!'

"Odd, but the next moment, it did! It's queer—do you ever get the feeling—how sometimes you feel that everything is being stage-managed, and that you have nothing to do with it excepting to go through your part? I got that feeling then—and kept it throughout the night.

"That rat didn't stay. My barn companion leapt to his feet, upsetting his tube, and hurled an empty bottle at it. I noticed he had a good supply of ammunition. It was a good shot, and the rat vanished back to wherever it had come from.

"He grinned at me apologetically. 'Don't mind if I'm a bit nervy,' he said, 'but even at my best rats finish me! I reckon one must have walked over my pram when I was a baby. I can face the other chap in the ring without turning a hair.'

" 'In the war I served under an officer who was scared stiff of large spiders,' I told him—it was a fact, 'so you needn't worry. He won the VC.'

"He swept the cards into a heap, and began shuffling.

"What would you have done? I was tired, but there was something pathetic about the fellow, and so I fell in with his mood. We didn't play for real money—he said he hadn't any—but we used nails for counters, there were tons about, and we must have played for three hours. Every now and again the rat reappeared, and when the bottles gave out he showered it with nails.

"It was grotesque, and I don't know how I kept awake

so long. He never showed any sign of sleepiness, but my own sleepiness increased steadily, till at last it beat me and I dozed off.

"The last thing I remembered was hearing him tell me, after a count of his nails, that I owed him seven hundred pounds."

Here my companion paused, as though expecting a question. I asked it.

"Wasn't it a bit unwise to go to sleep—with a chap like that watching you?"

"It would have been damned unwise, if I could have helped it", my companion replied. "Obviously! But I couldn't help it. And when I eventually woke up—how long ago? —an hour?—I woke in a panic. As perhaps you can imagine."

"I can, very easily," I agreed. "Well? Go on?"

He took a deep breath, and rubbed his forehead.

"The barn looked completely different," he said. "Daylight instead of candlelight. The cards were gone. And so was the man, for a moment I thought I had dreamt him. But then I saw something on the tub where the cards had been. An envelope. And on it was written, in pencil, "Don't open this till you get to the station.' "

"I know you didn't," I answered, as he paused again. "But why didn't you?"

"I'm not quite sure," he responded, as though he were wondering the same thing. "Sporting instinct? Or that feeling that the whole thing was being stage managed, and that I'd be acting before my cue? I don't know, I say. But I did wait till I got here—and you came in just after I'd opened the envelope and read what was inside."

"And what was inside?"

He felt in his pocket, and produced the envelope, and handed it to me. I took the half-sheet out, and this is what I found scrawled upon it:

"Thank you, chum. I enjoyed our little game, and I needed it. But what a mug to go to sleep with 40 quid in your letter-case! Only of course you didn't know that I was wanted for murder."

I swallowed, and handed the half-sheet back.

"And now, I suppose, he's wanted for your 40 quid as well?"

"Oh, no," answered my companion, in a rather choked voice, and opened the letter-case for me to see. The 40 pound notes were still there intact. All the man had taken were the half-sheet and the envelope. "So—what do I do?"

a lonely, lovely lady

by Rufus King

She held the letter in her hands for a long time, thinking, while her dark eyes stared from under fine lashes through a window that was sullen beneath murky overtones of a threatening storm. She felt wretchedly chilled and nervous, in a way that she hadn't known for years. It was of small moment in itself, the letter; but it served to bring her problems to a sharp focus and to set a period to any further procrastination.

Extra-sensory phenomena had never been considered by her in one way or another, for plainer terms such as moods, hunches, were more to her liking. She was experiencing one then: a sense of disaster (she went further in a rush of self-honesty and labeled it danger); and she was too clever a woman to dismiss the feeling without making an effort to trace it to its source. There was, that she could discover, absolutely none.

There is a song about "the secret places of the heart". Rufus King—Rufus Frederick King, to be exact—has long known these secret places and both sensed and written about the loneliness and the despair to be found there. We've already met Dr. Colin Starr in CASE OF THE FRAGILE FLOWER (SMM, Febr. 1963) CASE OF THE PLEASANT STRANGERS (SMM, June 1963), etc. Mr. King is the author of MURDER BY THE CLOCK (1929), DIAGNOSIS: MURDER (1941), THE DEADLY DOVE (1945), MALICE IN WONDERLAND (1958), etc.

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Her name was Lily Elsert. . . .

That was it: it was sixteen years ago when she had felt like this, during the first few weeks when she had come to Ohio and settled down in Laurel Falls with her daughter Nan, who had then been a child of three. Lily herself was at the time only twenty-two, but a certain maturity of manner had made her seem older. It had stamped her with a quality of agelessness which had never changed, and without detracting in any fashion from the warm charm of her character and pleasant looks.

As there had not been the least reason for anyone to be curious about them, her antecedents prior to Laurel Falls had been initially obscure. It was generally understood that they involved several cities which were as far-flung as Seattle and New Orleans, with brief sojourns at St. Paul and Pittsburgh in between. Lily had been accepted without the slightest curiosity as a delightful young widow whose name, then, had been Mrs. Robert Wardley.

There had been enough money for Lily to engage an agreeable suite in the Mansion House, and she had ascribed her decision to remain there simply to the natural beauties of Laurel Falls, which lay in the ruggedly hilly southeastern portion of Ohio, on the banks of the Onega River. Unobtrusively and always with a correct sense of reticence, she had found her way into the social life of the community. Her regular Sunday attendance with Nan at the Episcopal church in Laurel Falls had with time brought her many agreeable contacts, which later developed into sincere friendships.

It was p r e d e s t i n e d, of course, that she would marry again. Completely apart from any mental or physical qualities, Lily belonged to that fairly rare stamp of women who are, inescapably, wives. Without in the least being helpless, she did suggest an impression of being so. There was nothing conscious or deliberate about this on her part: it just was there as a fact, and every man felt it, and instantly started figuring out ways for helping and protecting her.

Lily had come, with the years, to know that look. To recognize it the instant it sparked in a man's eyes and then spread out into a warm, protective glow. Faintly she resented it, for she knew herself to be sane, sound and capable, w i t h strength that could cope, and had coped, efficiently with varied emer-

gencies. But she could not in the kindness of her heart, ever bring herself to the point of quenching it. Never, certainly, before the glow was fixed, and then it was always too late.

Milton Elsert had had it seven years ago, and so Lily had married him, and had moved with Nan from the Mansion House and into Elsert's spacious home on Omega Drive. It was a small estate, really, for the property extended in the rear to the bank of the river, and was masked from the main highway in front by broad landscaped lawns dotted with metal fauna elegancies of the day. The buildings, which included stables and a gate lodge, were in the handsomest tradition of Stanford White, and the three of them lived there in an even state of unexciting contentment, with Elsert daily protecting and cosseting Lily and she letting herself be protected and cosseted, and with Nan getting finished at the Misses Tunkets' in Maryland.

There was this to be said for the firmness with which Lily's roots had struck into the town's society: Nobody for a minute considered that she might have married Milton Elsert for his money, and this in spite of the fact that Elsert was a good twenty years her senior. There had seemed a rightness about the m a t c h : a satisfactory exchange of security for Lily and Nan, and of an agreeable companionship and shepherding rights for Elsert.

Then Elsert had died.

This was several months ago, after a full years' distressing illness which had terminated in a stroke, leaving Elsert helplessly bedridden until his death. So there was Lily a widow again, alone with Nan, and the sole mistress of an estate which the town felt certain must be very large.

It wasn't.

Elsert's malady had been seated in the brain, and long before his stroke his judgment had begun to falter, a condition that was aggravated by a dread on his part that he would die and Lily would be left unsheltered, a tragic, tender sheep alone among the financial wolves and morasses of the world's unsettled state. He had viewed the collapse of great houses, of guaranteed mortgage bonds (and similar once-invincible solaces for widows and orphans), and his tired, kindly head got completely muddled.

As a result, Elsert had converted a fortune in reasonably sound holdings into a myriad of desperate eggs for whose

goodness and hatching he would d e v e l o p some transciently intensive h o p e. He had specifically barred any sale of the estate during Lily's lifetime (always she must have shelter, a roof, and warmth and light, and things to eat), then had lumped the whole sorry mess into a trust, and had wished it on the First National Bank of Laurel Falls as both executors and trustees. For Lily.

Lily turned from the window with a feeling of dread at the immediate steps which she would have to set into motion. All her life she had disliked an air of tolerance; and Sheffield would, she knew, continue to be tolerant. Sheffield and Delilah both. They were part of the estate, having started in service with Elsert's parents, whom they had respectfully wept into their graves, and continued through Elsert, weeping him into his grave, and would undoubtedly (Lily felt) weep her into hers. They were, of course, the type of Negroes who never, never die. Lily had found it difficult to be firm with them, and impossible to be hard; and now she might have to be both.

She left the living-room with its fine old things and went through a broad hallway to the quarters in the rear. Sheffield and Delilah both stood up with gracious politeness when she came into the roomy kitchen. A rabbit casserole was fragrant on the range, and the air was pungent with the tang of baking bread. Lily's nervousness increased, and her fingers were chilled. She thought for a wretched moment that they might begin to tremble, like impossibly flexible icicles in a wind. She came straight to the point.

"I'm considering taking in tourists, Sheffield. If the plan is agreeable to the trustees, I'll arrange with Bellamy's after lunch to place a signboard at the gates."

Sheffield was a very old man (Delilah was simply in her seventies), and there were some who believed that he had marked a century. It unnerved Lily badly to see sudden tears wet his eyes.

He said: "We was afraid."

"There's nothing else I can do."

"No'm, we was aware of that."

Probably, Lily thought, before she had been aware of it herself. Well, there *wasn't* anything else, either. But this immediate capitulation surprised her until she reflected that it was based on an acceptance of overnight tourists as the lesser evil of possible

others.

There were the heirlooms of Sheraton, of Phyfe, some good glass, some silver. There were also the paintings: a fine Benjamin West, a Vanderlin a Rembrandt Peale, some lesser fry, but all of a certain value to a collector of Americana. Yes, therein lay their greater evil: she might have sold something or persuaded the trustees, rather, to permit her to do so. Sold some of the heirlooms out of the family, which was dead, but which didn't matter because in the opinion of Sheffield and Delilah, the Elserts continued to own them in some supernal fashion, whereas Lily only lived among them on a slender tenure of (still supernal) sufferance.

Oddly she thought: "And they're quite right."

She said to Delilah: "Some of the bedrooms might be made ready. There isn't much traffic in winter, so I doubt whether we'll need more than a few."

Delilah's origin was Jamaica, and she had never lost the soft slurred flavor of her English. She said: "Is it satisfactory to madam to use the ones in the north wing?"

"Yes; those, please, Delilah."

"Will there be meals served too. madam?"

Lily had wondered about that. She thought not. The first step alone was difficult enought of itself. And still, it seemed stupid to hang suspended in the center of a plunge.

"Perhaps morning coffee and toast, Delilah, and fruit-juice, in their rooms."

"Yes, madam. That can be done. And the silver?"

"Silver?"

"Will you wish us to put it away?"

It came back to Lily swiftly and more strongly, that foreboding sense of danger; and this time she could label it quite simply: Taking strangers into the house.

"Thank you, Delilah, for thinking of it. It would be best."

She left the kitchen and got ready to drive down to the bank. The thought stayed with her while she did so, expanding across a canvas that grew ever more somber: the potential dangers of the step she was planning, which so many hard-pressed women had been compelled to take before her.

A tourist house was different from hotels. Hotels had staffs, house detectives, any number of protective measures both for sizing up their guests and for coping with any eventuality whatever. But with a private house which

was suddenly thrown open to the public—

Lily cut the thought off sharply, settling a smart hat, arranging furs, thinking of her mirrored face and expensive turnout in the uncertain terms of a whited sepulcher, uncertain because she had never been sure as to what the phrase definitely meant.

She left the house by the rear and crossed a wide graveled square to the stables where her small coupè was garaged. The other cars were there too, the big landaulet (its severe beige interior as Milton had wanted it—as a perfect setting for Lily), the station-wagon, the foreign sports car — all on blocks, since the general staff had been dismissed, and only those permanent fixtures Sheffield and Delilah remained.

There was a feeling of snow in the air, and she speculated perversely on how quickly snow covered things, as it could cover the sign that might go up at the gates, masking its spurious welcome. Defeating, she subconsciously prayed in a moment of weak panic, its very purpose.

Mr. Lorrimer McKeith was, for the president of a bank, a young man, scarcely five or six years older than Lily herself. But then, the First National of Laurel Falls was a family affair almost to the point of being entailed. Groton and Williams, also entailed, had done their customary job, and had sent McKeith back to Ohio a finished product of their personal tradition.

He cordially detested everything about banking, and would have given anything to have outfitted a caravan and toured the countryside presenting plays of an intimate, intensive nature, in an intimate and intensive way. A yearning, he knew, utterly vain, for his body belonged to Laurel Falls, no matter where his soul might long to flit, just as the bodies of his ancestors had belonged to Laurel Falls before him. And whatever might churn inside of it, his shell was a beautifully glazed example of courteous business acumen and sound Rotary Club restraint.

He had gone through one brief and disastrous marriage, a rebellious gambol in reality among his secret Elysian fields, with a girl from New York's Greenwich Village. And Genevieve had certainly brought Life to Laurel Falls. Then, after busting up two families and giving a local welterweight ideas (finer things in life—the brain—a touch of soul, of poetry above the belt), Genevieve had got a divorce

and had returned, plus alimony, to Greenwich Village, leaving McKeith in a daze of unspeakable relief.

He caught Lily on her way to the paying teller, and led her across polished marble into his office. He had always liked Lily enormously, because he thought her decorative and knew her to be both intelligent and nice. Well, and comfortable too. How immeasurably so, he often thought, in comparison with his yardstick Genevieve. Recently, since he had found himself in the rôle of chief trustee to the Elsert Estate, he had worried about Lily terrifically, because he knew down to a penny the muddled financial abyss which Elsert had left her in. He seated her with a Clyde Fitch flourish, in an arm-chair, and offered her a cigarette.

"We see too little of you, Lily."

She smiled and said: "I've so little to come here for, Lorrimer."

"I know, and I've been wondering."

"What recipe I'll use for cooking the wolf?"

"Yes. The best thing to do. We've got to tide you over, Lily."

He stared at her earnestly, and Lily thought uncomfortably: "It's there. The look." She couldn't mistake it after so much experience through the years with its inevitable kindling, t h e g l i n t which would so shortly spread into the warmly protective glow. Right now, she decided, was the instant to quench it (just as she had always decided), but she couldn't bring herself to do so, any more than she had been able to in the past.

McKeith was saying: "I can't take the securities as collateral for a loan without having the bank examiners bring charges of lunacy and embezzlement. I don't think they're utterly worthless, but that's just my private opinion. I think the coal stocks especially will be all right after this strike nonsense is settled. We can't touch t h e house or grounds, of course, but that doesn't m a t t e r. I doubt whether you could even give the place away for taxes as things are now. . . . Lily,"—McKeith hesitated uncomfortably,—"you need cash. You need it for food and fuel. You need it to carry you until—well, the mines start paying again. I want you to let me take that stock over. Just a transfer sale, and later I'll sell them back to you."

She felt the sting of tears at the genuine warmth of his friendliness, at this interest in her concern.

"Thank you, Lorrimer; but

I've thought of a way."

"What is it, Lily?"

"I came here really to see you about it. To find out whether legally I've the right to do it. I want to turn the place into a tourist house, if that's permissible under the trust."

He sensed a firmness in her, a firmness against his stock-transfer idea, or any other idea which would simply be a euphemism for a personal loan. He thought of how rigidly the old conventions still retained their bonds.

"Lily, I don't like it."

"I don't myself especially, but what is there else?"

"I don't know. It's the usual solution, heaven knows: either tourists or boarders. There, Lily, why not boarders? People you know. At least they're —well, safe."

"But I *would* know them, Lorrimer. That's just it."

She touched, against her own convictions, on mountains and molehills, her decided preference in opening the house to strangers rather than to the permanence of acquaintances, the worries and eventual irritations of having them rooted beneath the roof. She asked again her legal status on the subject.

"Why surely, Lily, that end of it's all right. You can do any thing on earth with the place except mortgage it or sell it. . . . Lily—how are things right now? At this minute, I mean?"

"Nan wrote me this morning that she needs money. I'm drawing fifty and wiring it to her."

McKeith shoved a checkbook across the desk and handed her a pen. He knew her balance to be around ninety-two dollars. An idea occurred to him, and he felt immeasurably easier.

"Look here—I've got it! I'll fix up a chattel mortgage on some of the stuff. That's something we can do. Just a small one, Lily, for running-expenses right now."

There it was: the things. But it wasn't like selling them, and after some income started coming in, and after all there was no other instant solution to (she admitted it) almost instant starvation and penury.

"Just a very small one, Lorrimer!"

"Very small. What's Nan's address in Detroit? I'll take care of the wire for you."

"Thank you."

Lily gave him the address and wrote out the check.

McKeith said diffidently: "How's Nan doing, Lily?"

Her eyes were suddenly bleak.

"I don't know. I made her promise to write if she needed

money. That's all I know, Lorrimer."

"You do love her an awful lot, don't you, Lily? I don't blame you. Nan's one of the nicest girls I know. I've wondered—"

He stopped abruptly, and Lily said: "You've wondered what, Lorrimer?"

"I'm sorry, because it's none of my business, except that I like Nan so much. I've wondered about Gene Forrest. Nobody could help seeing how far he was gone on Nan, and I rather thought she felt the same way about him."

Lily's expression changed subtly. McKeith thought of it like something warm and fluid which all of a sudden hardens. It made him think of a movie he had once been at, when the machine s u d d e n l y stopped turning and left him there, looking at a still.

"Gene is so young, Lorrimer," Lily said.

"He's twenty-four."

"That's young." She repeated the word with almost a stubborn fierceness. "Young."

"Well, I'm sorry if I brought it up. I'll get the papers ready. This is Friday. May I come up on Monday for you to sign them?"

"Of course, Lorrimer."

"In the evening?"

"Surely, if you wish."

They rose, and McKeith escorted her to the door of the bank. He stood watching her as she moved through the gloomy light and got into her car and drove away. He thought that that *was* why Lily had let Nan go to Detroit and become a stylist, or window-decorator, or whatever it was: to get her away from Gene Forrest. It didn't make sense.

Mrs. Moltenberry, one of their heaviest depositors, said for the second time: "It looks like a storm, Mr. McKeith."

McKeith stared at her vacantly, beamed, and floated on.

Snow fell on Saturday.

Gene Forrest called on Lily in the afternoon. Gene had grown to consider his twenty-four years, since settling down at law at Hendrickson's, as middle age. His face had a healthy Scotch look, windburned and full of heather, for he managed to get in considerable skiing and skating when not chasing around serving summonses or doing the dreary spade-work on briefs. The tourist sign at the gates, as he had been driving past the Elsert estate, had hit him like a blow. He just had to go in.

Sheffield smiled at him with pleasure as he took Gene's hat and coat. Lily, in the living-

room, smiled at him too, but not with so much apparent pleasure. Gene felt foolish now that he was inside and actually sitting down beside her. What could you say, except that he had seen the sign?

He said: "I saw the sign, Mrs. Elsert."

"Oh, yes. Then the snow hasn't covered it?"

"No, it's perfectly plain."

"I had thought it might. A blizzardy feeling, don't you think?"

"Maybe. It's little snow, very fine. It could turn into a blizzard."

He felt hot and stuffy, and his wind-burn reddened more deeply. There were moments in a man's life when you either exploded or didn't, so he exploded.

"Mrs. Elsert, why don't you like me?"

"But I do Gene. I've nothing whatever against you."

"That's a funny way of putting it. I don't mean to be rude, Mrs. Elsert. You know that."

"Of course, Gene."

"Everybody knows that the estate—well, wasn't what everybody thought it was; but that sign — I mean nobody ever thought it was as bad as that. You can't *do* it, Mrs. Elsert."

His intensity bewildered Lily.

"Tourists, Gene? They're nothing to take so desperately."

"No, Mrs. Elsert, not tourists. Nan."

"What on earth has Nan got to do with it?"

"You sha'n't sacrifice her. I won't let you."

It had been a nervous, tiring day, and Lily's head ached badly. She could not, she thought, put up with a scene that was evidently to be predicated upon the emotional tempests of young (and thwarted) love. She saw the synopsis, of course, in Gene's earnest nut-brown eyes beneath their sun- and snow-bleached lashes: herself a tyrant mother offering Nan at the altar of some suitable wealthy match, grinding the petals of true young love beneath the excuse of knowing-what-was-best. Well, her head was in far too bad a state for any scene like that.

She said: "I know what you're thinking, Gene, and it's silly. I've no intention of forcing Nan into a rich match even if I could. Nan has an excellent mind of her own."

"Then what was the matter with *me?*" *It* was a relief in a way to get down to brass tacks like this, after weeks and weeks of doubt and worry, and of not knowing why or what. "Nan loved me, Mrs. Elsert."

"Did she say so?"

"No. I never asked her. I didn't have to ask her, Mrs. Elsert." He added miserably: "You sent her to Detroit."

"Gene, you must excuse me, but I'm not feeling very well. I gave Nan permission to go to Detroit. I didn't send her. You must believe that, and as I say excuse me."

He stood up, his face no longer ruddy, but white.

"You've got to forgive me for busting in like this. Maybe I was wrong. You get to thinking things are so sometimes, just because you want them to be."

He held out his hand. "Good-by, Mrs. Elsert."

"Good-by, Gene."

Lily felt empty and sad and lonely when Gene was gone, in the way she supposed all mothers must feel when they've had the miserable satisfaction of doing something which they know is right. Having forgotten (she supposed this too) their own young assurances and fierce wants, in the mellow smugness of the simple fact of maternity and the broadening, deadening wisdom that had come with age!

The snow fell all through the dreary afternoon, muffling and whitening the earth, and Sheffield said to Lily as he served dinner: "I's done turned on the light on the signboard, ma'am."

"Oh. Thank you, Sheffield."

Of course Bellamy's would have arranged a light when they had put the board up in the morning, so that the sign could be read by strangers who passed in the storm. It chilled Lily faintly to realize that the die was so definitely cast, that at any moment at all, from now on, all through the dark long night, the bell might ring and a stranger would walk in with the right to pay for shelter, to go upstairs and do all of the things which were so commonplace in a guest: bathe, undress, go to bed.

Wander. . . .

The word stuck, but Lily forced herself to think it out: wander about the house at night, perhaps leave it, on some mission which would be beyond her privilege to know, and then come back. In all the silent loneliness of the endless hours of the night, the house would be the stranger's to do in what he pleased.

The last mail came at nine. There was a letter in it from Nan, very brief, oddly restrained: the wire for fifty had been received; there were thanks, a warmingly deep expression of love, and a completely obscure sentence which read: *"Things just do happen,*

don't they, Mother?" Across the bottom were the usual scratches of crosses, only there were more of them, and Lily thought they seemed feverish and as if they'd been crossed on in haste.

It snowed through Sunday, and by Monday a gale was whipping it into a blizzard, grounding all planes, blocking roads, and thoroughly disrupting traffic. The afternoon held the somber qualities of night.

The doorbell rang at four.

As Lily entered the living-room, the stranger rose. She saw that Sheffield had taken his hat and coat, leaving him a dark, stocky man in a pin-striped serge suit that slipped over the borderline of conservative tailoring. Lily thought of his black hair as having a g a n g s t e r gloss, and she thought that he could not spend too much of his time in the sun. His eyes, as she advanced closer to him, became more penetrating, and their expression of sharp concentration did not change as he held out his hand and his lips widened into a smile over strong, good teeth.

"Mrs. Elsert? My name is Parne—Chester Parne. It's quite a storm, isn't it? I didn't know you caught them like this in Ohio."

Lily took his hand, finding it cold and hard in curiously, a lifeless sort of way.

"We've had more snow this winter than in a good many years, Mr. Parne." (What on earth did you say next? Baldly, the price? She had come to think during Saturday and Sunday and the earlier parts of today — all of which had been void of tourists—that none would apply, that the plan was a dud: a blessing that was far from being unmixed.) "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Parne arranged himself with initial f o r m a l i t y in a brocaded lounge chair, lifting his trouser legs to preserve their creases, then carefully placing his white, manicured fingers on his knees. "I hope you've room for me."

"Of course."

"Thank you. I'm heading East, but I ask you—"

His gesture encompassed impassable drifts and the biting, blinding coldness of the snow. Lily wanted to respond to his determined cordiality, feeling that it should have sprung from her rather than from him, but there were slender contradictions about him which stirred her uneasiness and set her nerves on edge. A cigar, she thought, a good hotel, T-bone steak smothered in

onions, and whisky straight, an accomplished s k i r m i s h with the girl at the newsstand, with the girl at the telephone switchboard — all of such things would have been more in keeping than a capricious decision to pass the night in problematical comfort, and certain boredom, in a masked house.

"There is an excellent hotel in town, Mr. Parne. I'm thinking of your dinner. We've unfortunately few facilities for entertaining—for serving, I mean, meals."

Parne settled back in the lounge chair and sprawled his legs a little, looking Lily over: Not bad. Very firm in all the right places, and still unholstered. In fact, to cut it short, very nice.

"Don't give it a second thought, Mrs. Elsert. I'm not hard to please. I always say that pot-luck sometimes produces the tastiest dish. Hotels!" Lacquered fingertips brushed them away. "Your sign assured me that I wouldn't have to drive another foot. You've no idea how bad it is out, and how glad I was to find shelter. What a magnificent secretary!"

Lily flushed slightly and said: "Yes, isn't it! A Sheraton."

Parne stood up and walked over to it, balancing expertly on the balls of his feet so that his movements seemed flowing. He rested fingertips on the wood's p a t i n a, softly stroking it, while his penetrating eyes flicked everything over. He *couldn't,* Lily told herself, walk off with that. But she knew there was nothing like that in his mind. Nothing (this conviction made it worse) so simple. A swift urgency to ask him to leave took shape, and she was trying to decide how to word it, how to *enforce* it, when Sheffield came in, looking futilely everlasting, like a pressed fern which any unaccustomed disturbance would crumble.

"The gentleman's bags are upstairs, ma'am. Would you wish me to go with you, sir, while you put your car in the garage?"

Parne turned reluctantly from the Sheraton secretary (it seemed to absorb him) and looked intently at Sheffield.

Lily said with a sharp edge of desperation: "Mr. Parne isn't staying. Mr. Parne will want dinner. He has been very kind about our lack of facilities, but I'm sure he will prefer the hotel."

Years of an ingrained and profound sense of hospitality forced Sheffield to leap into the breach before, in miserable confusion, he realized the impertinence of his move.

"We's a small roast for this evening, ma'am."

Parne's smile flashed at Lily, diligently encompassing her, broadly certain of its powers, which had never yet let him down.

"What did I tell you, Mrs. Elsert, about pot-luck?" The smile shifted to Sheffield. "Thank you very much. I hope the old bus will start. She's been coddled by a winter in southern California. Well, I'll be seeing you, Mrs. Elsert."

Lily heard Sheffield out in the entrance hall getting things from the coat-cupboard. It was like a mire where every step to extricate yourself only got you in deeper. Mr. Parne's bags were upstairs. Surely, in hotels, it must be done when any doubt existed. It would take ten minutes, possibly longer, to put the car away. She knew it stupidly vague, this expectancy, this dread that somewhere among Mr. Parne's belongings some clue would exist to focus his contradictions into an understandable explanation, no matter how melodramatic.

Like a gun (shoulder-holster and harness complete—Lily knew her Class B's) or thousands in hot money, or a sealed metal case: dope. She thought: "I'm the only dope. I started this tourist idea, and I'll go through with it. The man's probably some traveling salesman—with a larded wife and six little larded brats all bottled in five-rooms-and-bath in a suburb."

Lily thought this while her feet were carrying her up the wide curve of mahogany stairs. A case-hardened blonde was more likely, with a glass jaw and a speedily evanescing liver. She found Parne's bags in the endmost room of the north wing. Her faint hope that they would be locked vanished. Sheffield had opened them and they gaped at Lily from a luggage-stand, all bright new pigskin.

Perhaps if she just ran her fingers through their contents, carefully, just felt. . . . She did this, and everything felt like clothes except for a leather case which held toilet articles. No gun, no hot money and no dope. Nothing whatever to pin a dismissal on, to place Mr. Parne among that sinister fraternity where she felt he belonged. Faintly, from downstairs, came the sound of a closing door.

Lorrimer McKeith called at eight.

Sheffield told him, while he took off his hat and coat, of the advent of Mr. Parne. Sheffield regretfully feared, remembering Mr. Parne's attack upon the roast and Mr. Parne's elegant little-finger

movements while s i p p i n g from a glass, that Mr. Parne was n o t quite folks. Mr. Parne's table-talk, too, had at moments been weighted with a certain innuendo. Colonels, of course, sometimes had a gusto for that sort of thing, but not men of the breed of Parne.

McKeith's hair, had he been pelted, w o u l d have risen straight on end, when he went into the living-room and Lily introduced him to Parne. How like her (McKeith thought, briefly gripping the white, deadlike hand) to retain her charm of social courtesy even for this porker who was paying for his food and bed. Well, if Lily could, he could too!

"Wretched n i g h t, Mr. Parne."

"You've said it, McKeith. I certainly thank the little lady here for having a place to hole into. Local?"

"Oh . . . yes, I live in town."

"What's your line?"

"Banking."

"I get it." Parne smiled jovially and patted McKeith on the back. "Well, it takes all kinds. Me, I'm in leather.—I'll use your library to get off some mail if it's all right with you, Mrs. Elsert."

"Certainly. T h e stationery—"

They waited until Parne was gone.

"Lily, you can't be alone here with that man."

"But I'm not."

"Oh, those two!" McKeith shook Sheffield and Delilah out of the picture. "Look here—I'll get hold of somebody; I'll send my housekeeper up to stay with you."

"I'd feel like a fool. No, honestly, Lorrimer, just look at it from my point of view: I've started a business venture, and I'm going to run it as a business woman, not as a social violet. I'm not a social violet, Lorrimer. I'm tough."

"I suppose if you insist, Lily."

"I do, Lorrimer."

He took papers from his pocket and Lily signed them, mortgaging t h e Benjamin West.

"I had hoped to stay for a while, Lily; but they've called some fool meeting of the Board of Trade." (To stay not only for the evening but for the night, a wakeful police-dog on the stubborn alert against Parne; but that would be something. Something for Laurel Falls! Funny, a total stranger could come along and hand over a few bucks and stay all night, and not so much as a tongue-tip would wag. But if a friend who had his own home in town did it—*Lord!*) "Your balance is good

and healthy again at the bank. So any time you want to quit this, Lily—"

"Thanks, Lorrimer. And you know how I feel about everything you've done. Good night."

"Good night."

It couldn't very well be Lorrimer coming back again—not at ten o'clock.

Lily opened wider the hall door of her bedroom. Possibly Mr. Parne had gone to the stables to get something from his car, and it was he whom she had heard closing the heavy front door.

A voice called faintly from below: "Darling? Where are you?"

There was no other voice like that one, certainly not for Lily, like Nan's. The swift surge of joy which she always felt whenever Nan, unexpectedly, would be near her was pricked by a stab of fear. What on earth had brought the child home? Lily thought: I'm worrying again at shadows. I'll turn into a neurotic idiot if this keeps up." But the money Nan had wanted was concrete, and that puzzling sentence in her letter: *Things just do happen, don't they, Mother?* This sudden appearance on top of Mr. Parne —*with* a man like Mr. Parne dug in—in the house—

Lily forced herself to put the thought, with its nameless implications, aside. She managed to call loudly: "Nan, dear, I'm up here. I'm coming down. I'm so *glad*, darling." She managed, too, to run down the broad curved stairs, to look with welcoming eagerness at Nan, snowflaked and bundled in mittens and furs, glowing-faced, to take Nan in her arms and press her, all frosty, tightly to her. And smile.

"I had to come."

"But of course, darling."

"I lost my job."

"There—now the galoshes. . . . Do sit down, dear."

"I've used very little more out of the fifty than the busfare, Mother. There's scads left."

"Your hands are icy. Soup or hot chocolate?"

"Hot chocolate, p l e a s e, Mother. Mother—that sign at the gates. I hadn't any idea. Oh, *Mother!*"

"Stop it. It's coming down tomorrow. Lorrimer's fixing everything until the mines are worked again." (Into the discard with any more Finer Feelings, let Sheffield's and Delilah's cerements recriminations fall where they might. Mortgage — sell everything: the glass, the silver, the Vanderlin, the Rembrandt Peale. Sell Sheffield and Delilah. But

have no more Parnes in the house with Nan at home.) "*Stop* it, Nan, I say."

"All right."

Sheffield, looking utterly unsalable, was coming along the hall.

"Miss, Nan, I do declare! I's heard your voice. Well, welcome home."

Now t h a t ' s o d d, Lily thought. Nan was doing nothing about Sheffield's greeting. Nan was looking over Lily's shoulder toward the library door—at Parne! Lily's heart stopped dead. It was later, much later during the insufferable hours of the night, before Lily was able to disect the one intense look that passed between Parne and Nan, like a cold clear light in darkness, before a veiling mist set in. Only one thing was certain to Lily at the moment: they knew each other. Then at last Nan said: Thank you, Sheffield. Do you think Delilah could produce some hot chocolate?"

"I jest knows as she can, Miss Nan."

Lily felt her lips saying, "Nan dear, this is Mr. Parne. Mr. Parne is taking one of our rooms for the night. My daughter."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Elsert."

"Mr. Parne."

"This is surely no night to be abroad in."

"It is pretty grim."

(They weren't looking at each other now. Just talking. Holding their eyes, with a certain care, just off each other's faces.)

"Come from far?"

"From Detroit by bus, Mr. Parne."

"Well, I bet it was tough going, although I must say those babies can pound over the road, no matter what the weather is. It beats me." Then once more he looked at Nan directly. Yes sir, it does beat me — Miss Elsert." Parne's good, strong teeth flashed brightly at Lily. "Would it be all right if some of that proposed hot c h o c o l a t e was shared by the lodger?"

"Of course. Shall we go into the living-room?"

Lily had never felt like this. It was like being pushed suddenly onto the lip of dying, she supposed. She started walking toward the living-room doorway. . . .

The clock struck one.

Lily turned on the reading-lamp beside her bed. She realized it was useless to try to sleep. And it was then, after moments of thinking, that the look between Nan and Parne became finite: there had been recognition in it, and on Nan's part, shock. Recognition had lain in Parne's but there had

been no shock; rather, after an initial touch of surprise, almost an expression of satisfaction. A satisfaction at something unexpectedly—Lily tried to segregate the proper word—helpful.

Five o'clock struck as Lily let herself out into the hall. She had taken several steps before the darkness struck her like a blow, making this house, which was her own, seem unfamiliar, for she had never moved about in it before without lights. She went more swiftly through this inimical strangeness, to the left, past the wide vault of the stairway, to the left again, and then on until her fingers brushed Parne's door. Any hesitation would have defeated her; so she rapped lightly, waited, and then rapped again.

"Mr. Parne?"

There was, Lily realized, small need for any whispering. She doubted whether even a scream could be heard by Nan or Sheffield or Delilah in their distant places in the house. She rapped more loudly, and said more loudly:

"Mr. Parne?"

A revulsion of fear overcame her as she recalled her earlier pictures of a stranger wandering through the rooms, moving with stealthily investigating footsteps along the halls. Suppose Parne were behind her, standing perfectly still, and listening and watching, and making up his mind just what he was going to do. Her fingers closed on the knob in panic, and she opened the door.

She said into what was still just further darkness: "Mr. Parne! This is Mrs. Elsert, Mr. Parne!"

He must be gone, because she caught no sound of breathing. If he wasn't just lying there quietly and holding his breath. Lily found the switch for the ceiling-lights, and pressed it.

Parne grinned at her from the floor. . . .

He was dead. Lily stood there without effort, feeling no weight on her feet, while she thought of the Latin for that grin which at times twists the lips of the dead. *Risor — risum — mortis;* and all the while she floated on air over closer to Parne. Otherwise (ignoring the grin) he was so neat.

Saffron silk pajamas were opened at the throat, exposing a V of thick black hair shaved across the top in a straight hard line. Leather slippers were on his feet, and a Roman-striped linen bathrobe over his pajamas. His head was across the sill of the bathroom doorway, his leather

slippers toward her.

Then, thoughtfully, his tongue stuck out.

Light was faint gray against windows when Lily came to, with Parne beside her, dead on the floor. She felt stronger and far more sane. She got to her feet and looked at Parne's wrist-watch on the bedside table. Six o'clock. Sheffield and Delilah would be waking up, then getting up, then coming downstairs, and very soon finding that Mr. Parne was a corpse.

Shot.

Blood on the bathrobe told Lily that. The gun told her that. It lay just inside the hall doorway. She recognized it as the small pearl-handled .22 which Milton had kept in the drawer of the secretary down in the living-room. The Sheraton. It had to be that gun. Pearl handles were so rare that they scarcely existed any more. Lily had known it was kept in the secretary; Nan had known; and Nan had known Parne and Parne had known Nan. . . . A second surge of faintness forced Lily to sit down before she should fall down: a detestable momentary weakness during which her years of strength seemed to choose this instant to betray her.

She desperately wanted advice. Lorrimer McKeith could advise her; so could Dr Colin Starr, who had attended Milton during his final illness. Gene Forrest could. But none of them could. Because she would have to say: "A man has been murdered, shot by a gun that we kept in the secretary in the living-room, and Nan knew him." Never (this at least was clear and final) must anyone ever know that Nan knew him. . . .

The letters!

The letters which Parne had gone into the library to write. There might be references, something in them to establish a connection between himself and Nan. Lily fought back a faintness and stood up. . . . Ten terribly careful minutes satisfied her that there were no letters in Parne's clothing or in the room—unless they were in the open bags on the luggage-stand.

Sheffield and Delilah would, by now, be out of bed.

Lily went over to the bags. This time she didn't just run her fingers through them. She took everything out. That, of course, was why she had missed it before: flat on the bottom of the Gladstone. Staring straight up at her. It was a picture: a cabinet photograph of Nan.

She took it out of the bag, thinking: well, it's true. No

chance had brought Parne to the house. That, naturally, was final. His coddled car in southern California, his heading East, his avid relief at the signboard which had spared him further storm-harried steps, all of those fictions could be jettisoned with surety. What had there been, what *could* there have been, between a man like Parne and a girl like Nan to (yes, face it!) have driven Nan into taking the little pearl-handled gun and—

Sheffield and Delilah would now be nearly dressed. . . .

Then something about the portrait held her. It wasn't Nan at nineteen, at now. For more than a year Nan had been wearing her hair fairly short, with careful Lindbergh carelessness that had satisfied, apparently, Nan's nascent spirit of revolt—whatever it had done to her appearance. The hair was up in the picture, far off the face, in the fashion of a couple of years back, when hats had stayed on only after hours of tactful effort and collusions. And the hair seemed longer.

The mat was embossed with the Detroit branch crest of Endermann & Endermann.

Two years ago Nan *had* been away for six weeks during the summer, taking a course in design in Cleveland, working daily at the studios which were run by that Austrian woman who had never got over batiks. In Cleveland, not in Detroit. Not, however, so very far from Detroit. . . .

Delilah would be putting their bed in order, and Sheffield would be ending the intricate knotting of his tie. . . .

Nan on the witness-stand. The polite district attorney. The motive. The suddenly tough district attorney. The motive—the motive—the motive. There must be no murder. No. Mr. Parne was not murdered. Mr. Parne committed suicide. The gun would have to be put closer. It would have to be put into Mr. Parne's dead hand. Lily picked the gun up and wiped it with her negligee. That wasn't enough.

Doorknobs.

Mr. Parne dragged easily: a loose, fluid weight. His slipers came off, showing nicely tended feet. Must remember to put them back on. Lily wiped the knobs of the hall door, letting Mr. Parne lie on the floor. Then she pressed his right, complacent hand on both knobs. She pulled him back again so that his head once more lay across the sill of the bathroom doorway, because there was some blood on the floor, and he ought to be beside it as he had been.

She tore the cabinet photograph into small pieces and flushed them down in the bathroom. She put the slippers back on Parne's nice feet. The gun looked all right in his hand, even though his fingers were indifferent about gripping it.

Lily backed away from the bathroom doorway, hysterically f a s c i n a t e d by Mr. Parne's broad grin. . . .

It was her room. It was her bed. The clock struck eight.

Lily roused, under the slight shaking of her arm, from the warm blessed confusion of exhausted sleep into which her breaking nerves had plunged her.

"Oh—good morning, Delilah. What time is it?"

"Good mawning, madam. It is eight."

The full force of recollection pierced Lily. Somehow, instantly, she must warn Nan —no, not warn, but must be constantly near her, strongly close to her, to say clearly, firmly: "Suicide." When the body was found.

"I thought you had better know, madam."

(Here it was.)

"Yes, Delilah?"

"We just got us another t o u r i s t. He's a pleasant-spoken gentleman from Kansas City, Kansas, and he's gone got himself all tuckered out from fighting that there blizzard through the night."

"No—Delilah, we can't—I mean I've arranged things at the bank. The sign is coming down."

"Wish I'd've known of that, madam. I reckon it's too late. As I done said, he was a dead tired gentleman, so I showed him straight up to the room next to Mr. Parne's. He said he planned on just to take a good hot tub and then turn in. I done explained to him, madam, about the bathroom being in between."

How do you dress for the death of a stranger?

Lily amended this into: How do you dress for the death of a stranger when you (still) don't know about it? She kept her eyes just past Delilah's face, which had acquired with the years the texture of a placid coconut, and thought: "Every hour from now on I must be on guard against mistakes such as that. They are the little sign-posts which lead the mind trained in criminology into unmasking you." A minute-by-minute vigilance against the fatality of minor slips. "I know nothing. Mr. Parne is—was a stranger who applied for lodgings out of the storm. At eleven o'clock last night he said good night

to my daughter and to myself and went to bed."

"Have you the gentleman's name, Delilah?"

"Yes, madam. Mr. Horace Hangaway, from Kansas City, Kansas. Maybe it's jest because he's so tuckered, but he's a mighty peaked-looking gentleman. His eyes appears like they been all burned up."

"He—how long has he been here?"

"Why, he's j e s t come, madam. Sheffield is putting his car away, because he was too far wore out to do it by hisself. Will I take breakfast up to Mr. Parne, or do I wait until he rings?"

Lily's hand did not quiver on the counterpane, but lay there placidly — almost (she thought) as though it really belonged to her.

"I would wait, Delilah, until Mr. Parne rings."

"Yes, madam. May I draw your bath?"

"Please. And the gray wool, Delilah."

"Yes, madam."

It was important to be dressed, to feel the bulwark of clothes about you when the climax should be faced. You could not dress in seconds, not bathe and dress, not with casual normality; and surely seconds were all that would be granted. If even that. If only Delilah for once wouldn't putter, and be deliberate about b a t h temperatures: would simply turn on water, then rip the gray wool from the closet, and then go!

The sound of water peacefully pouring came from the b a t h r o o m ; then it was stronger, and finally it steadied down. Perhaps Mr. Hangaway of Kansas City, Kansas, had not been able to "take it" any more than Lily had: the neatness of Mr. Parne, and the impersonal quality of his protruding tongue. Mr. Hangaway with his general peakedness and his clinker eyes might have fainted too.

Knuckles rapped briefly on the hall door.

"Delilah!"

"Yes, madam?"

"See who that is, please."

"It's I, Mother," Nan's voice called through the panels.

"Darling—come in."

She looked like a schoolgirl across the room through the muffled light which the storm gave with i t s still-falling snow, until she got close to you; and then it was obvious to Lily that Nan hadn't slept, and Lily thought: "She *isn't* a child any longer; she's getting the woman look."

"Did you sleep well, dear?"

"Yes, Mother. And you?"

"Perfectly."

Delilah was satisfied about the bath. She was laying the gray wool on the chaise-longue, removing its hanger, smoothing its folds.

"The dark oxfords, madam?"

"Please, Delilah."

(Go—go—go—but no, now don't go, don't leave me alone with Nan, with this girl-stranger who must be waiting just as I am waiting, with a wall of glass between us.)

"Shall we breakfast in here, Mother?"

"I think not, dear." (Just as with the clothing, the defensive properties of one of the public rooms would be safer for the blow.) "There's the extra work, with Mr. Hangaway, with Mr. Parne."

"I can manage, madam."

"We will breakfast downstairs, Delilah."

"Yes, madam."

Delilah went, leaving Nan standing close over by a window with her back turned, and with nobody knew what expression of despairing bleakness in her eyes, which studied, presumably, the falling snow. Lily slipped on a robe and started calmly toward the bathroom.

"I shan't be a moment, dear."

"All right, Mother. Is there —is there somebody else?"

"Yes. A Mr. Hangaway came this morning. Delilah didn't know—that the sign was coming down, I mean. She arranged for him to stay." Irresistibly Lily went over to Nan and took her in her arms and kissed her, because she had to feel her and somehow recapture the very fact of their relationship to one another; but the wall was still there, even though her arms went through it. "Don't worry, darling."

"Of course not, Mother." Then Nan did turn sharply. Her face was still in shadow, because of the snow-glow behind it. "Worry?"

Lily said swiftly, "About the tourist problem, dear," and went into the bathroom and closed its door.

Lily used no soap, nothing, none of the pleasant array of accessories which Milton had always wanted her to have for leisurely, scented bathing. Just into the water and out, and a rapid drying. There was something wrong, from the very fact that the blow had *not* fallen before now. Mr. Hangaway's door of the bathroom might have been bolted in the inside, of course, by Mr. Parne; and Mr. Hangaway might be waiting until his n e i g h b o r w o u l d be through—might even, in his exhaustion, have decided to skip the proposed hot tub, and

have tumbled his peaked and tuckered-out body straight into bed. That would be worse, as the waiting would be prolonged.

Only the gray wool now, and the oxfords.

"Nan, darling."

"Mother?"

"Gene Forrest was here. He called yesterday afternoon."

"Yes?"

"Lorrimer McKeith seems to think rather well of him, about his prospects. He thinks Gene has steadied."

"Oh?" Nan's voice was toneless.

"Yes. Gene noticed the tourist sign in passing. It upset him. He felt the vocal touch about it, the baying of the wolves." (Keep talking, just talking). "I reassured him, I hope, that we were still divorced from imminent starvation, and I also felt rather as if I'd underestimated him. I liked him, yesterday, very much. . . . Well, shall we go down? Popovers, I think, and eggs? Bacon?"

On the lowest step of the broad curved stairway Mr. Hangaway was seated: a gaunt, dark bundle in the hall's uncertain twilight. He was wearing a stained woolen bathrobe from which his wrists and shins stuck out, pipelike. His neck was pipelike too, and seemed far too reedy for his bony, large head, which possessed the merest minimum of flesh. He made no move to get out of their way as Lily, followed by Nan, neared him, but sat on, a lonely bundle of spindles, in some remote world of his own.

Lily said quickly: "Go back upstairs, darling. Delilah told me that Mr. Hangaway was—worn out."

Hangaway's voice was frightening because of its strength. You were unprepared for such power from that skeleton source. He did not bother to look around.

"I'm not worn out. I'm sick. There's a dead man in the bathroom. Go and take a look if you don't believe me. He shot himself."

Lily's arm was around Nan, pressing her cruelly close and tight. The cue had come so smoothly, with such profound relief.

"Suicide?"

"Yes. The gun is in his hand. His head is over the sill, and I might have stepped on it. God, but I am sick!" Hangaway's head dipped forward until it swung between his knees, a large ripe melon on the thinnest of stems. "Get me a doctor, please. And maybe you'd better do something about the police."

"A doctor, of course—Doc-

tor Starr—possibly, I mean, it's so difficult to be certain about death—"

"Don't worry about that. He's dead, all right. Like mutton."

Dr. Colin Starr viewed the morning with distaste. The blizzard had not died with the night, and outdoor movements would be on a level, he supposed, with the popularized version of Balto's dash (plus serum) to a stricken Nome. A prospect which gave him no pleasure. He stoked up heavily on rashers of bacon on eggs, having because of his build plenty of bunker space. The early forties became him.

His younger years were comparable to Lorrimer McKeith's, only it had been Andover and Yale rather than Groton and Williams, and medicine instead of banking. But his roots were the same, deeply bedded in this section of Ohio's soil, and he was a happy and contented man.

Starr sometimes reflected on the sharper brilliancies of the larger world, of the greater centers, the more rapid tempos of nationally famous minds, and always decided his own puddle to be preferable. His large fine house, which his grandfather had built in the solidest tradition of mansard roofs, with its garden, and its lawn that faced on Omega Drive, satisfied him completely as a good shelter and a good place for his work.

Starr's secretary, Miss Wadsworth, came hurriedly into the dining-room, looking very upset in her frame of stiff white starches.

"Mrs. Elsert has just phoned, Doctor. A man, a tourist—she thinks he is dead. She thinks that he shot himself. Mrs. Elsert had decided on taking in tourists, but not any longer. I mean now that *this* has happened. Oh, I am so sorry for her."

"Yes, of course. I never realized things were so bad."

While Starr drove his car through the storm, he felt he had not realized that Milton Elsert must have left affairs in such a state. He could not picture Lily Elsert as a hostess for uncertain strays. She lacked the mettle which such a job required. This suicide business was pretty shocking, especially if the man were dead. Even if he weren't, it was bad enough, even if the man were to pull through. Starr damned the drifts, the ruts, the blinding, dark pall of the ceaseless storm. . . .

An hour after he had reached the house, and after he had finished his business with Parne's body, Starr sat

with Lily in the living-room downstairs. Lily decided that this was going to be tough, worse than the police had been, and District Attorney Hefferfield, during their brief and polite initial questioning of her when they arrived.

Lily liked and admired Starr very much, because he was solid and kind, and although he too had that protective look, it was a comfortably general one which encompassed humanity as a lump, not just specifically her. . . . But he knew you so well. No matter what your lips or your face might be saying, Lily felt he knew what you were really saying on the inside to yourself.

She appreciated the futility of trying to deceive him. She wouldn't think of trying it if it were just for her own sake; but nothing, not even his peculiar powers for sensing the truth in you, was going to prevent her from trying because of Nan.

"I'm terribly sorry that all this should have happened, Mrs. Elsert," said Starr.

"Was there nothing could be done?"

"Done? Oh, no. He died several hours before I got here, somewhere in the neighborhood of four or five o'clock. (Lily bit her lips sharply to prevent them from saying: "At five, Doctor, because of the tongue.") "We're arranging to get Mr. Hangaway out of here shortly."

Lily didn't care about that. She cared nothing about Mr. Hangaway and his inability to stomach the shock of a look on sudden death. It was of Parne that she wanted to hear: what Starr thought, what the police thought, if they were satisfied that Parne had taken his own life.

"Was Mr. Hangaway so seriously shocked, Doctor?"

"No, it isn't shock. I've sent for male attendants and the ambulance. He'll be taken to the hospital."

"Male attendants?"

"Yes. It's all right for you to know, now that the danger is over. The man is an addict. The morphine and syringe, the usual paraphernalia, they were in his bag. You've had a lucky escape. Mrs. Elsert—you and your daughter."

"He might have been dangerous?"

"Very dangerous. You never know how a man of that type is going to jump." Starr smiled at Lily reassuringly, brushing aside with a vague gesture the appalling shock it had been to him when he realized that Hangaway might have passed a night in the secluded loneliness of the house with Lily Elsert and her

daughter, and with nothing to deter him but the mothlike fragility of two old Negro servants. He kept carefully from showing in his eyes his case-history knowledge of what addicts like Hangaway had done.

"Just when did Mr. Hangaway reach here, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Shortly before eight."

"Yes, so Delilah told us. We were interested in having you confirm it."

"I know it was then, because Delilah woke me at eight and told me he had just come." (This was leading up to something. You could tell that. Above the still-untasted horror of Mr. Hangaway's being an addict, there were arrows that pointed toward Parne.) "He told Delilah that he had been driving all night, and that he felt worn out."

"The district attorney was rather hoping that he'd come here sooner."

"Mr. Hefferfield? Why?"

"Yes. He wondered whether there might not have been some connection between the two men, under the circumstances."

This was it, all right. You didn't say a thing like "under the circumstances" if things were smooth and unquestioned and slotted in their grooves.

"Does Mr. Hefferfield feel that Mr. Hangaway could have been responsible for Mr. Parne's suicide?" (As stereotyped plot-pattern presented itself, and Lily seized it.) "Something of a nemesis, Doctor? Mr. Parne felt that Mr. Hangaway was catching up with him, and killed himself rather than face—whatever it was he had to face?"

"No, Mrs. Elsert. I hate putting this on you all at once: Mr. Parne was killed. He was shot in the back, just below the left shoulder-blade. I imagine from some distance. The bullet didn't come out."

Lily shut her eyes for one moment while the betraying weakness swept through her. All of her feverish gestures in the night in that room, born of her sickness and terror, had been a waste and a mocking futility: the fingerprints on the doorknobs, and the gun, all of that dragging and lugging of Parne with the feel of his loose, loose limbs away from and then back again to the blood on the floor. Why hadn't she thought of examining the wound?

Then the concern split into her that the negligee which she had worn while going into Parne's room was red. Red upon its redness, there might well be a spot of blood. Upon something of Nan's, whatever it was that Nan had worn on

her own desperate mission, some touch of the damning carmine might be, too.

"It is so incredible, Doctor. It makes me doubt fact. No one was here last night but Mr. Parne and ourselves."

"Yes, we know. It's what bothers them. It's why Hefferfield is still hoping that some connection may turn up with Hangaway. It would be so logical if it would, because an addict of Hangaway's nature wouldn't have the slightest scruple about killing, no matter how tenuous the motive. Hefferfield feels it too coincidental for credence that a potential killer, such as Hangaway, should turn up here just by chance on the heels of a homicide."

"Can't they make him talk, Doctor?" (How useless, Lily reflected, this eagerness which she pressed into her voice. Mr. Hangaway could talk his head off, and nothing would efface her withering knowledge of a link between Mr. Parne and Nan, of the fright in Nan's eyes, of Nan's picture, and of Milton's own little pearl-handled gun.) "Can't they find anything in his papers, his things?"

"No, there's nothing of any value to the police in his papers, and he won't be able to talk for some time. He had started to get pretty violent. I gave him an injection. Mrs. Elsert, these are just the abominable situations which sometimes we have to go through. We'll take Hangaway off very shortly; and they're arranging about Mr. Parne. Within an hour or so your house will be your own again."

A flood of unbelievable relief went through Lily.

"Do you mean that Nan and I—we could go away?"

Starr looked at her curiously. There was something there. Something deeper, of a more violent urgency than a simple desire to leave a house where tragedy had occurred.

"I'm afraid I couldn't say. That possibility isn't within my province, Mrs. Elsert."

"No, I appreciate that, Doctor. When anyone meets death suddenly—"

Starr said earnestly: "You've nothing on earth to worry about." He felt, after he said it, that his attempt at lightening the situation fell far short from being effective: "Neither you nor your daughter is the type to shoot a stranger. I can assure you that the thought hasn't even been considered, and that Hefferfield, that everyone, has nothing but sympathy for you and will get you through the necessary steps as simply as they can."

"Just what are the necessary steps, Doctor?"

"They're entirely unalarming. They're looking for signs of forcible entry by the killer during the night. They'll trace the gun. They'll make an exhaustive search of the house and outbuildings and grounds. Then they won't bother you here any more. They'll concentrate on checking Parne's past."

Lily's slender fingers tightened silghtly. "Do you know how they do that, Doctor?"

"I don't exactly, but they've astonishing facilities for it. However, that's nothing for you to worry about. The only other thing they'll want you to stay around for will be the inquest."

"They can't—they won't want Nan at that?"

"Perhaps it could be arranged, but frankly, I doubt it. She did meet Parne last night and talk with him. They're likely to insist on having all the first-hand evidence about the man they can get." (Starr thought: "Here's a woman who is badly in need of help. Why on earth doesn't she loosen up and tell me what's really worrying her? It's beyond money-trouble; it's beyond Parne. There's something feral about it, a guarded tigress touch. Good Lord, perhaps it's there: her young.") "About her, Mrs. Elsert—about your daughter."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"I know how this has upset her; but beyond that it struck me when I talked with her, that things weren't quite right. As if there were something on her mind."

"Well," Lily managed to smile, "she did lose her job."

"In Detroit, wasn't it?"

"Yes; Nan has been doing free-lance fashion designing. I suppose there was the new-broom angle about it, in that her start was such a success. You knew she won a competition which our Laurel Falls newspaper conducted. It gave her a good deal of publicity and brought her in quite a lot of orders. She even had her picture" (the bright smile on Lily's face froze into a grimace) "in the papers."

Starr smiled back at Lily, while appreciating the grimace, and while wishing he could shake her into being sensible and getting this incubus off her mind. It was not necessary for him to remind himself that most of his women patients went through initial periods of stubbornness which would have sated a mule.

"Then I suppose," he said, "that people just stopped being fashionable?"

"Something like that, Doctor."

"Well, she'll get over it. The young do. At least, she's at home again, and that's something for all of her friends here to be thankful for. Will both of you dine with me tonight, Mrs. Elsert?" (Gene Forrest—Lorrimer McKeith — Gene's mother—the Tomlindon kids —they could be rounded up.) "Some of your daughter's friends are coming. I'm sure you'll both sleep better after a change of—well, scene?"

Quite suddenly Lily started to cry. Not much, but she knew it would be the beginning of a good case of hysterics if she didn't instantly stop it. Goodness, kindness, they were the things she couldn't stand up against right now. They turned her strength into water.

"This is stupid of me, Doctor. We'll be glad to."

Starr stood up and held out his hand. He ignored her tears entirely.

"Then at eight?"

"At eight."

They removed Mr. Hangaway at eleven.

It took two burly attendants from the psychopathic ward to do so; and even they failed to muffle his strong voice with its initial outpouring of obscenities when they started to force him down the broad curved stairs. Lily heard them, sitting in her private living-room with Nan, and talked calmly through them, raising her voice a little as a baffle, then sinking it again as Mr. Hangaway's stridency would diminish.

Mr. Hangaway was out. Out of their lives forever. Which left, simply, Mr. Parne. Just herself and Nan, and Mr. Parne's murdered body in between them. It, and the wall of glass which Lily insisted on keeping there, because she knew that the moment she let into her full consciousness the first concrete shape, the first absolute fact, she would no longer be a strong protector but would go to pieces. Nothing but complete ignorance of truth could be her safeguard and her armor.

Sheffield knocked and came in, and said that District Attorney Hefferfield would be pleased if Mrs. Elsert would consent to join him downstairs in the living-room.

"I'll be back shortly, Nan, dear. We'll lunch up here. Something simple, Sheffield. Tell Delilah that sandwiches will do, and tea."

"Yes ma'am."

"You might ask her to have some ready for the gentlemen of the police. If they are still here."

"Yes ma'am."

Lily had met District Attorney Hefferfield casually at various affairs at the country-club, occasionally at the houses of mutual friends. She thought him a pleasant man, one normally tinged with a preoccupation in his work, and knew that officially his terms in office (he had served two) had been highly satisfactory to the town.

He turned from a contemplation of the still-curtaining snowfall and came over to greet her, taking her hand and smiling with, it seemed to Lily, an unusual air of formality. She thought: "I'm sensitive to shadings right now. I must keep things in their true proportions."

"I must thank you, Mr. Hefferfield, you and Doctor Starr, for arranging about Mr. Hangaway."

"I suppose the Doctor told you how lucky you were? What an escape!"

"Yes. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you." Hefferfield smilled briefly, almost boyishly, in fleeting concession to his hearty liking of Lily Elsert, and of everything he'd ever heard about her. "I'm sorry you find me in my official personality."

"Naturally, Mr. Hefferfield. In fact, you find me in mine—a dispenser of lodgings. It turned out a rather disastrous one. I'm doing it no longer."

"I should hope not. I can't understand how Lorrimer McKeith ever let you."

"He did try to dissuade me. I put my foot down."

Here was the trouble, Hefferfield reflected, with dual personalities: you had to goad into action the one which you knew became you least.

"I don't suppose you noticed the gun, Mrs. Ellsert? The one that was in Parne's hand?"

"No, not really. I did see a gun there, and then Mr. Hangaway had spoken about it when he told us that he had found Mr. Parne."

"Well, the gun was one of Mr. Elsert's. The case for it was in that secretary over there,"

"Milton's? He had one, of course—but of *course*, Mr. Hefferfield. I remember it now."

"Yes, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Mr. Parne had scarcely been here more than five or ten minutes when he noticed that secretary, because it's a Sheraton. I remember he went over to it and examined it quite carefully. In fact," (yes, thank God, Sheffield *had* been here) "Sheffield came into the room while he was doing so, and asked Mr. Parne about putting away his car."

"Good. That does help a little. You've no idea how hard it is to get things clear. Did Parne strike you as a man who would be especially interested in antiques?"

"Frankly, he didn't. But he did recognize that the secretary was good."

"We'll naturally know more about Parne." Hefferfield's gray, solid eyes turned toward the windows. "Our blizzard is a quiet one, Mrs. Elsert. No howling winds. It has a muffling quality about it. Did you hear anything, any unusual sound whatever, in the house during the night?"

"No, none at all.

"It's a curious situation. We know that somebody must have come into the house, but we don't know how. They have a good man on the force for this forcible-entry business, and he's decided that there's nothing doing. Whoever killed Parne must have been let in through one of the doors—let in by someone already here."

"But that's impossible."

"No, we think that possibly Parne let the man in himself." He could not look directly at her. "We've *got* to think that, Mrs. Elsert."

Lily said equably — she hoped so fervently that her voice did sound equable: "But why would he?"

"We don't know. It would presuppose a rendezvous, wouldn't you think? I can't see Parne coming downstairs and letting in a stranger. Possibly Parne went outside the house and met him at some appointed spot in town, but I can't figure him then bringing the man back here. No, we've got to presuppose that Parne came to this house not through any chance, not as a passing tourist, but intentionally, and that his killer knew that Parne was going to do exactly that."

"I can think of no reason on earth why Mr. Parne should have come here."

"No more can we. And still, any other supposition seems to make less sense, if we want to connect the two men. Parne and Hangaway. Then there must be a motive. Every murder has a motive, Mrs. Elsert, even for a dope-fiend like Hangaway. Our chief difficulty is that the motive probably lies in the past, and we don't know Parne's past. We don't, so far, know a thing about him. You've not remembered anything further that he said last night, Mrs. Elsert?"

"No; he spoke of the West Coast, that he was driving East. That's all, beyond the most general sort of conversation," she said, as if concen-

trating on Parne's arrival.

"Well,"—Hefferfield looked at Lily for one penetrating instant and then stood up, smiling, and holding out his hand, —"thanks for helping us about the gun. We can think of Parne as finding it himself in the secretary. That will do for a starter. Perhaps of his coming downstairs after you and Miss Elsert had gone to bed, and looking at the secretary again. This time, looking through it, and finding the gun. Then either meeting his killer outside and bringing him back here, or just letting him in. Then the killer took the gun away from Parne and shot him, and fixed things up to look like a suicide. I'm afraid that it couldn't be thinner, but any picture does for a beginning. Doctor Starr tells me that you and Miss Elsert are dining with him to night?"

"Yes. He thought the change of scene—"

"And a very sound thought. Incidentally, we feel that you may be nervous for a night or two. It wouldn't be natural if you weren't. I've persuaded the Chief to have a man stay here nights. You and your daughter will feel more secure. He won't be a bother, but will just sit out in the hallway — if that will be agreeable to you, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Quite." Lily forced the smile on again, thinking that by now it must be pretty threadbare. "It's good of you, very kind of you to think of it, Mr. Hefferfield."

Mr. Parne, in a basket, left at three.

Lily's eyes were leaden. It seemed to her that she had never slept. The brief hour and a half that she had caught last night in her exhaustion was nothing. Wave after wave of wanting to sleep flowed through her, dragging down her eyelids and drugging any coherence in her thoughts. If she could rest some, really rest for several hours, then she felt that she could handle things as they came along.

She took the red velvet negligée from its hanger and went with it over to a window. Blood, she instructed her drugged intelligence, did not stay red. It dried out something darker: a brown. She saw nothing on the short, soft pile; but after her tired hot eyes had begun to glaze with red, her fingers found a patch of stiffness. Naturally, blood would harden and get stiff. Stupid not to have thought of that. It was there, all right: quite a patch of it, under the right sleeve, which was cut very full and flowing,

where her arm had encircled Mr. Parne's dead-weight looseness while she had been pressing his willing hand upon the door knobs. Well, water washed out blood.

Lily filled the washbasin in the bathroom with lukewarm water (hot either set blood or didn't, cold, ditto), and let the right sleeve of the negligée sink in it and soak.

That was when she noticed the piece that had been clipped out of it, about the size of a quarter, from about the center of about where the center of the blood-patch had been.

That will be, Lily thought, the State's "Exhibit A."

Lorrimer McKeith left his house at twenty past seven. Normally it was only a ten-minute drive to Lily's, but the drifts and the ruts and the falling snow would slow him up tremendously. His car was a coupé, conservative, expensive and black. The house which he left (bowed out by Whittle) was conservative and expensive too: pale sandstone, smooth in line, a gem of rich simplicity.

Genevieve, his divorced wife, had thought the house unexcitingly stupid, a bastard compromise between the rococo and the new. Her opinion of Whittle, of course, was unprintable. They had despised each other, virulently on sight. Well, all that no longer mattered. Genevieve was a hot scarlet flame of the past. Lorrimer closed a beaver collar more warmly about his throat, tightened fur-lined gloves, and reflected dreamily on all the worth of a comfortable solidity. Surely, in face of this horrible business of last night, the wretched, cruel shock of it, Lily would defy the conventions (just as he was prepared to defy them) and let him take care of herself and Nan. Let him bring them both within his shelter, no matter how few the months were that Elsert had been in his grave.

They could marry quietly and go away. Rio de Janeiro was enchanting at this season of the year. Quietly (but not too quietly) in its warm Latin gayety Lily could bloom and Nan could have a good time. Then, after several months of colorful lassitude (parrots, maxixes, jalousies, exotic flowers, the Belasco harbor), they would come back to Laurel Falls and settle down to a vista spread with fallow fields, of a peaceful domesticity. It never occurred to him for an instant but that Lily would agree to all of this, because that was the way one felt about Lily.

Lily. . . .

But the good-looking young uniformed cop in the hall was something of a shock. You couldn't escape the youngster's presence; and still he seemed to flatten into a backdrop of the scene; there, and yet not of it. A bright red bulb of danger, bare and unshaded, in the toned glows of this lovely house. Sheffield succeeded admirably in acting as though the cop weren't there; so Lorrimer did too.

Lily and Nan were ready, waiting, cloaked and with galoshes on, in the living-room. They came out and joined McKeith immediately.

"You were an angel, Lorrimer, to have thought of coming for us."

"Of course I'm an angel, Lily. Hello, Nan."

"Hello, Mr. McKeith."

(*That* would all stop pretty soon. He'd be "Lorrimer" to her in practically no time at all. Nice, to have such a fine daughter all fully grown.)

"Still storming?"

"Lily, this snowfall is going down in history. Like that midget affair they're still boasting about in New York."

They heard, as they chatted in the warm richness of the coupé, the staccato explosions of a motorcycle behind them. It became impossible to ignore them.

"Glad the boys are taking such good care of you, Lily."

"Mr. Hefferfield was sweet about it. Have you heard about our dope-fiend lodger?"

"Ladies, I have heard everything. Our local sheets are plastered with hot details to the point of indigestion. I've read every one of them. If Hefferfield hadn't posted guards at your house, I'd have got out Betsy and camped there myself."

"I thought it was Roscoe."

"And they say guns are sexless!"

"Crowding you, Nan dear?"

"No, Mother."

"I suppose Doctor Starr won't mind if we leave early? After all, after last night—"

"I imagine he'll force you to, Lily."

Lily looked young in beige, and Nan very young in white. Mrs. Forrest, Gene's mother, was not too successful in plum velvet, and Alice Tomlindon (Harry's twin) needed nothing but a wire hook and a Christmas tree for her candy-striped taffeta. It was all very gay.

It was, Lily thought, determinedly so: murder, addicts, the patient watchful eyes of the law, were deliberately suffocated beneath a wealth of social pleasantries in this handsome, turn-of-the-century drawing-room of Dr. Starr's. Only Mrs. Forrest was a false

note, in her plum. Lily didn't blame her. Ida Forrest naturally must feel that Gene had been treated—well, shabbily. It would be unnatural if a sense of resentment were not present, both against Nan and against Lily herself.

Starr said to Lily over cocktails: "I know you must be interested, so I'm bringing it up. It's about that man Hangaway."

An excellent phonograph was softly full with a bright song of current vogue, and Lily smiled. "Yes, Doctor?"

"He got back to normal during the afternoon. He's still in the hospital and under observation, of course. Hefferfield has tried his best to get something out of him, but he's turned sullen. He just refuses to talk—that is, about anything that counts."

"About a possible connection with Mr. Parne?"

"Yes. His story is one of those simple tales which seem infernally impossible to check up on, from a police point of view. Nobody can be pinned down to an hour-by-hour accounting of what he was doing while driving through a blizzard. Hangaway says that he started out around seven o'clock last night from Detroit."

"Detroit!" (Nan—the same vague finger of murk, of unnamable dread, its tip in Detroit, as the picture of Nan among Mr. Parne's belongings h a d b e e n taken in Detroit. . . . What was it—*what was it* that linked her child with a Parne, and now with an addict—the vicious center lying in Detroit?) "But I thought Mr. Hangaway came from Kansas City, which—Delilah insists—is in Kansas?"

"He does. But he stayed over yesterday in Detroit, and didn't start out until evening. That would have made the driving time to here all right, with the road conditions what they were. He says he's a free-lance writer, and eventually expects to put Sinclair Lewis out of business. He says that Lewis has a complex and never gets any closer to real life than in pictured reflections of his own private moods."

"Mr. Hangaway certainly *is* a dope-fiend."

"Oh, that part is real enough, and he does have his amusing points. Addicts can. It's one of their main dangers. They lull you with their pleasantries into a false security before—well, the other side of them comes out."

"He says he only stayed in Detroit just yesterday?"

"Yes. He told Hefferfield he was on his way east to

look up a literary agent in New York—when he went into the bathroom and found Parne. He stops right there. Nobody's been able to get another word out of him. . . . Now, that looks like dinner." Starr eyed a maid in the drawing-room doorway. Let's go in."

McKeith sat at Lily's left, and Mrs. Forrest faced her directly across the table. The others didn't matter. Lily felt the current of these two interests strongly turned on her. She understood Ida Forrest's perfectly, but not so well Lorrimer's. She found it too accomplished, in the sense of something having been already settled, and which she had not been consulted about. It was (except that he was seated at her side) reminiscent of the sort of feeling she had had when dining out with Nan's father and with Milton Elsert: The feeling of being a wife.

It both saddened and annoyed her. Some day, if Lorrimer wanted her to, *still* wanted her to—but he wouldn't. He wouldn't even right now, if he could see the pictures which were chasing through her deadened head. She thought: "I'm the mother of a girl whom I love more than I love life, who has shot a man, no matter why, no matter with what justice, or driven by what sense of appalling fear, and my hands have washed out his blood. She was connected in some way with that man, and with an addict who takes morphine. Some maelstrom trapped her."

It would never fit with Lorrimer's honest, rugged fineness and all of his decent gentility. None of his qualities could stand up against it, and certainly not the friendly complacency of mere love. Because it was love, of course, and no blind passion of the type which made a habit of considering the world well lost.

It was too bad, because if things were different, if *that* thing wasn't there, Lily would have been glad to marry Lorrimer. He would let her sleep. She said in her thoughts, too, to Mrs. Forrest: "Don't worry, Ida. Nan won't marry Gene, either. Nan will see to that herself, so do take that anxious look off your face."

She said to Lorrimer, while still thinking all this: "I'm sorry, but I *don't* make raised rolls. I don't cook. Nothing. Oven temperatures betray me."

"You'll never have to, Lily."

"If anything should happen to Delilah, my life would roll on from can to can."

("No, Ida," she went on—in her thoughts—to Mrs. Forrest, "Nan's like me, like that. She'll never hurt you through Gene, any more than I'd hurt Lorrimer through himself. We're taking this gracious respite, this kind, good respite of Doctor Starr's, until a piece of velvet, the size of a quarter, is chemically analyzed and its stain has been determined as human blood. Don't resent us for it. It won't last long.")

There were two rubbers of bridge, while the phonograph muted through the background-tones of a Debussy group, while brandy-and-sodas were served, and the party broke up at eleven. Lorrimer drove them home, still in the manner of a husband driving his family home, still implying with every comfortable word and gesture that *that* was settled. He stood in the hall for a while, frosty-cheeked, healthy, so implacably sound, prolonging his farewell before Sheffield's visionary eyes, and the handsome young cop's black shoe-button ones.

"Tomorrow, Lily, shall the three of us lunch at the club?"

"Thank you, Lorrimer."

"All right with you, Nan?"

"I'll be glad to, Mr. McKeith."

"I'll call for you. I'll call for you at one?"

"We'll be ready."

"There's that new picture at the Bijoux. I thought that after lunch we might drop in?"

"Why not?"

"By all means let us be that."

"Well—good-night, Lily."

"Good-night, Lorrimer."

"Nan—"

"Good-night, Mr. McKeith."

He looked at her dotingly.

"Nan, I'd forgotten that you still curtsey. At nineteen. Not much—but there's a trace of a curtsey still there."

"I'm an anachronism, Mr. McKeith."

"I honestly think you are. One in wolf's clothing, but of the very nicest sort. Good night."

The heavy front door closed, shutting Lorrimer and all of his world out into the snow, closing Lily in tight with Nan. Lily opened her cape and started peeling a glove. She went over to the handsome young cop. He stood up, and she said: "No one has told me your name."

"It's Suffolk, Mrs. Elsert, Roy Suffolk."

"I'm worried about your comfort, Mr. Suffolk."

"Oh, I'll make out all right."

"I'd like Sheffield to show you the kitchen and where things are. He'll leave sand-

wiches, but you'll want your coffee when you want it, and you'll want it hot."

"Thank you very much. Mrs. Elsert."

"Will you attend to Mr. Suffolk, Sheffield?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Then good night—good night."

Nan went upstairs with Lily. They parted on the landing. Nan went to her rooms. Lily went to hers.

The bed looked so inviting. It had never looked better. Turned-down white percale, smooth as glass, the pillows plumped and waiting to be dented, the wool, the folded satin-covered fleece, all said: "Come along, forget everything. Kill your thinking apparatus and come to bed."

It didn't work.

Lily understood why. Your body and head could get too tired to be tired. Motorcars sometimes used to act that way, just kept on running for a while even after the ignition had been shut off. From residue, searing heat. Which was sometimes also why they exploded or burst into flame after smashing head-on into a blank wall.

Which were no thoughts to put her to sleep.

They all had to be blanked out: Mr. Parne's corpse, the morphine-addict Hangaway, two basins of pinkish water, a thick-lensed chemist testing for human blood, Ida Forrest's bitten, hardened eyes with their defensive frosts, and Lorrimer. And Nan's connection with the whole sickening mess. . . .

By one o'clock the thoughts were still alive and eagerly active in the profound hush of the sleeping house. No, Nan wouldn't be sleeping; and neither would that handsome young patrolman Suffolk. Well, maybe he would: it was a fundamental rule of the service that every watchman only remained awake when he was not on guard.

Lily turned on the bed-lamp. It was still close enough after one not to matter. You could walk, of course; just up and down the room in slippers and a wrapper, until you stumbled and tripped yourself to sleep.

Lily g u e s s e d walking wouldn't work, either. It simply made her feel foolish. This is the way, she reflected, they do it in the monthly releases from Hollywood, in their latest super-refurbishment of prison stories. That wasn't fair, though, because they had given up the pacing-my-cell scene during the past few years, along with the fashionable establishment of a man

as a villain by having him kick a dog.

Prison. . . . *Prison*. . . .

She had to see Nan. That was at the base of her not being able to sleep. Right now she had to face her own daughter, just as last night she had steeled herself into a determination to face Mr. Parne. Lily stopped short and stared. It seemed that Nan must have had the same thought too-

The hall door of the bedroom was opening. It was the click of the latch which had told her so, strongly sharp and metallic because of the imponderable stillness.

"Nan, darling? I'm awake. Come in."

Mr. Hangaway hesitated on the threshold, looking at her.

Lily caught the glitter in his eyes. She was far from devoid of a knowledge of addicts and of crimes-of-sex, even though she lacked Dr. Starr's case-history data. The newspapers had frequently supplied her with enough. A scream died in her throat: killed by the thought that if ever she had protected her daughter, she must protect her now. . . . If it were not already too late.

Mr. Hangaway stepped softly into the room.

He closed the door.

Hangaway was in no hurry. He had all the time in the world, and didn't bother with any further movement after shutting the door, but just stood quietly and contemplated Lily with his shiny bright eyes.

Lily didn't make any move, either. She couldn't. Within the drained and terrible empty feeling of her body, her mind suggested several impossibilities. Each held an ultimate conclusion in Hangaway's death, because that struck her as the only state in which safety lay for any of them: the one sure defense against his glitter.

While he continued to contemplate her, Lily's mind considered the job in detail: you shot, or stabbed, or hit, when you wanted to kill somebody; and the first two methods were out. As far as that went, so was the last. The fragility of the bric-à-brac and *objets d'art* with which Milton had so lovingly bedizened Lily's room would simply strike Mr. Hangaway as funny, and serve as stinging goads to thrill him toward his purpose.

That left her hands. It also left the tigress which Starr had sensed in Lily earlier in the day, crouched and desperate for her cub.

Hangaway seemed satisfied with his leisurely observation,

and finished with it.

"I'm glad you're being sensible, Mrs. Elsert. Screaming women irritate me. That flatfoot downstairs was good enough to let me in. He won't bother us any."

The vagueness of his statement chilled her, with its definite demolishment of that bridge of escape, the slender hope that young patrolman Suffolk might have been in the kitchen making coffee, and might, under the emergency of a scream, come to their help.

She forced herself to look unflinchingly at Hangaway, thinking: "This man is a drug-addict. Never, for an instant, let his apparent quietness deceive you. And don't corner him." Somewhere, Lily reflected, she had picked up the recipe. Because if you cornered them, they never hesitated any longer, but just struck. Maybe that only applied to maniacs, and referred to humoring them. Maybe you couldn't humor an addict.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Hangaway?"

"Well, I don't know. I mean I can't be specific, because I'm not absolutely sure myself."

"Will you excuse me for a moment? I'll change into a house-dress—"

"Just hold it, Mrs. Elsert. Sit down." He nodded sleepily toward a slipper-chair, and then nodded again with faint approval as Lily sank into it. "Quit figuring out ways for leaving this room, because that irritates me too."

Hangaway stepped unhurriedly over to the foot of the bed and sat down on it, sticking out his pipelike angles, and shoving his thin hands deep into overcoat pockets.

"Where's the girl's room, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Delilah? She and Sheffield—"

"Don't get smart! The kid."

"My daughter is spending the night with friends."

Hangaway sighed.

"Look, Mrs. Elsert: Among other things, I've got a gun. See?" He took a service revolver from a pocket and showed it to Lily, then put it back in the pocket. "I took it away from young Handsome downstairs after I knocked him out. I used a tire-iron, so better not go expecting him to be bright for quite a while. What you've got to realize is that I've got something on my mind, and I don't want to be"—he searched thoughtfully for the precise word—"to be brooked."

"No—of course not, Mr. Hangaway."

"And don't humor me. I know what you're feeling!"

The repetition of the phrase pleased him, but in the light of a practical example of his distaste at obstructions, it struck him as rather weak. It felt a lack of a proper appreciation of his power—his strong and serviceable power. He got up from the foot of the bed and stepped softly over to the slipper-chair, and then, still softly, kissed Lily on the lips.

"You don't like that, do you, Mrs. Elsert?" He bit her cheek sharply, and with a skeleton hand, almost succeeded in stifling her cry. "Now that sort of treatment you don't mind so much. Just take it easy. Write it off as a lesson in behavior. You see, I understand women like you pretty well. You can take a beating easier than you can take a kiss on the mouth."

Idly he observed the tiny blood-bead on Lily's cheek, her tense trembling.

"I know the gun didn't impress you," he said, "but I think that that object-lesson will. It's funny how little you realize what worlds we are apart. You in orderly fields, and me in a jungle. Oh, I've no illusions about myself, none whatever. Your sort of life, love on rose-leaves, I'd simply get no kick out of it. I *like* it to be sordid, illicit, in caves of darkness, obscure corners of a barn. Wipe off your cheek; there's blood on it. Go ahead. I'll let you."

Lily stood up and went to a dresser. She took a handkerchief from a drawer and pressed it to her cheek. There was a nail-file with a silver handle among the articles on the dresser. Lily covered it with the blood-spotted handkerchief, looking at Hangaway's very bright eyes as they stared in reflection at her in the mirror.

"I doubt if you'd know where to put it," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The nail-file, Mrs. Elsert. People have such funny notions about vital spots. They seem to think that all you have to do is to stick something sharp into a man's body, and he dies. Now, I've seen a man with fifteen or sixteen stab-wounds in him before anything happened of any importance. They used ice-picks, and even then he almost got well. That wasn't because he was tough, but simply because the job was sloppy. Wait—"

He held up bony fingers and shook one warningly, while both of them listened to the rapping on the door, then to Nan's voice saying: "Mother, are you all right? Did you call just now?"

Lily did not stop to think,

to figure anything out. There wasn't anything you could figure, beyond trying to block Mr. Hangaway. Surely just the sheer weight of your body would act as an anchor, and you could stick for at least as long as you could breathe. She threw herself at him and clung to him in her great despair, without much to cling to but his overcoat. which bunched softly in her nands and felt slippery.

"Nan darling—run—*run—get out of the house—get help—*"

Hangaway looked down at Lily derisively and disentangled her arms, like threads; then he cupped his fingers tight over her mouth and pressed cruelly, and shoved her hard backward, and sent her staggering backward into the slipper-chair.

He opened the hall door.

"Come on in, Miss Elsert."

Nan stood and looked at him, while her face changed from bewilderment into horror, the terror of comprehension. She ran past him, straight to Lily, and cowered down on her knees by the chair, while that animal look of fright was in her eyes, the helpless look of stark dread, and her voice shook.

"What's he doing here? What's he doing to you, Mother?"

"Nothing—just be quiet, darling."

Nan said to Hangaway, so weakly that it seemed silly to expect him to hear her: "What are you doing here?"

He shut the hall door and sat down on the foot of the bed again, idly observing the two tense, shaking women, pleased with the picture in its satisfactory presentation of utter rout before his remarkable power. The kid's voice was as it should be, too: a proper bleat. A very pretty dish. Maybe, if there was time, he'd see how he felt about it.

"Well, as I said to your mother, I don't exactly know. I tell you what, Miss Elsert: We'll start with Detroit. Just what gave you the first lead?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He looked pained. She was obviously going to be irritating. Maybe she would need an object-lesson like the one he'd given her mother. Her cheek was very fresh and very inviting. So was her neck. Sock the old one cold first, naturally.

"I've gone to some trouble to explain to your mother that I don't like being irritated, Miss Elsert. I'm after information, and I won't be brooked. How did you get wise to Worthby Hainestead?"

"I don't know him."

"Well, this looks like it's going to be tough. How much did you shake him down for?"

Lily said fiercely, seeing what she saw in Hangaway's eyes, and no longer caring how foul the maelstrom might have been: "Tell him anything. Tell him anything, darling, that he wants to know. You know that I love you, darling—will always love you, darling."

"But I've nothing to tell him, Mother."

"Why don't you listen to her, Miss Elsert; She's giving you good advice. You can't handle this thing right, not alone. Even if your mother's in on it with you, you'll both end up short. Hainestead is hard—as you know. He'd see to it that somebody wrapped you up in cement just as quick as he'd pick a daisy. You'd better turn the proof over to me."

He stood up suddenly, and you hardly noticed him moving, but he was beside them, leaning down with his big bony head, and he reached out and touched Nan's cheek with a finger.

He said, with a stealthy softness: "Did Parne get them last night and hide them?"

His finger went on stroking Nan's cheek experimentally, like a fleshless bone making circles on a peach. It felt downy and soft to him, and he thought: "Power *is* everything in life."

Power was way beyond bodily perfection and pretty looks, in the things it could get you. He was glad that he wasn't pretty. Pretty boys never got anything much for themselves, because too many people wanted them, and they didn't last. Decay set in quick, and then they were sunk, and everybody who had liked them gave them the go-by, and looked around for something fresher. Sometimes it even discouraged them into suicide, and they killed themselves as a last grab after the limelight and being important.

He said again: "*Did* Parne get them, Miss Elsert?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know Worthby Hainstead?"

"No."

"You didn't know Parne?"

"No."

He said with quiet indifference: "You're a liar, Miss Elsert.

"Oh, tell him, darling—*tell him!*"

"She will."

"I can't."

Nan's shaking increased, and sobs suddenly choked her. Lily thought: "She is lying about Mr. Parne. That much

I know. Maybe I'm the one who's keeping her from talking. Just by being here."

Hangaway seemed suddenly to lose interest in them. He was thinking: "Now what does that black ape want?"

"I's telephone for the police, madam."

"Sheffield—go—go—"

He stood uncertainly in the hall doorway, with a great sense of dignity touching him, with his vague eyes staring from their distant past into a far more distant future, out of that black and old serene face.

"So you have phoned for the police."

"Yes sir, Mr. Hangaway."

Hangaway went to a window and looked out upon the dark snow-laced sky, on the white silence of the ground, into the whole deathlike hush of the shrouded night. There was no hurry. Even if the police had been able to make it with dog-teams, they could no more put a finger on him than they could on an elemental force. Still, it was irritating, these bothersome little people all harassing him.

"You—Sheffield—come over here."

"Yes sir."

"No, come right over. Come real close."

"Yes sir."

"I guess you're pretty pleased with yourself."

"I wouldn't know, sir."

"I don't mean about the police."

"No sir."

"I mean about coming in here like this." Hangaway's voice slipped into a sneering purr. "To offer your protection to the ladies."

"I is in their service, sir."

"God, what a world!"

Hangaway thoughtfully considered Sheffield's old face for quite a while. It seemed all lighted up, strangely, through its blackness. A dumb and patient glow. Like mugs and martyrs. Like a better grade Tom-show, with heaven throwing an overhead spot from the flies, and *Legree* all set with his whip raised to crack. It was definitely sickening.

Hangaway sank his fist with plenty of satisfaction into the face.

Then he left the room.

The chair was a recipe too: tilted at an angle, and its top wedged under the knob of the door—a Chippendale guardian between them and Mr. Hangaway until, after a battle through the snows, the police would arrive.

While you kept moving and doing things, it was all right, while the pressure of immediate danger was upon you, sur-

facing your fears and rejecting any impulse to think them out.

Lily pressed a cold cloth on Sheffield's face, which was a dark oval on her lap, and thought: "That's a foolish notion, and I guess I must be crazy. I wanted him out of here more than anything on earth. But I've got to be honest. I felt that way about him, in terror about him, only up to the moment when I didn't know what he had come here for. When I thought he was simply driven by a drug-crazed lust for attack and violence. Then he started in on Detroit."

"Darling — a c o l d one, please."

Nan took the towel.

"Yes, Mother."

There could be no sane or insane reason for Hangaway to have come to the house in the morning, to have returned for his obscure purposes tonight (with its inclusive assault on the law) if *he* had killed Parne. Because he would have got what he wanted at the time of the murder. What he wanted, and what Parne had wanted.

"Thank you, darling."

"Mother—why don't they hurry? Why don't they get here?"

"They will, dear. The roads. The drifts, I imagine."

Sheffield wandered toward the hall door.

"With y o u r permission, ma'am— I is worried about Delilah."

"How cruel—how thoughtless of me! We'll all go, Sheffield."

"Come, Nan." Lily removed the chair. "We'll go."

She led them along the lighted hall. It was inimical in spite of its lights, peopled in its air and deepness with brooding, a n g r y wraiths whipped from dark fastnesses of the brain. Lily walked swiftly, feeling Nan and Sheffield close behind her, up the stairs, and opened a door into a room where a bed-lamp cast long shadows.

"Delilah — a r e y o u all right?"

Delilah looked queer, sitting up on the bed, clutching a bright pink nightgown tight about her withered body.

"I feel a touch of the misery, madam."

"Did Mr. Hangaway come in here?"

Delilah's eyes, in spite of their sharp intent, managed to look vague.

"I did not know the gentleman was here, madam."

Lily felt an obscure uneasiness about the immediate moment. She studied Delilah's

blank, reserved face and could read nothing, any more than she'd ever been able to. She said: "We feel reasonably certain that he has left the house. The police will be here shortly." (You simply *didn't* use such phrases.) "Is there something wrong, Delilah? Are you certain that you feel all right?"

"Yes, madam." Her eyes were veiled again, staring a long way off at nothing. "If madam will excuse me for not getting up?"

"Of course, Delilah. I'm telephoning Doctor Starr. I believe it's quite safe to leave you. (Was it? *Was* it?)

"We must see what we can do for the patrolman. We don't know how badly he may have been hurt."

"Yes, madam."

The nagging doubt increased.

"Just the same—I think after we leave, I'd bolt the door."

"I will, madam."

The queer procession recurred through the night-filled, silent house, with Lily silently leading, leading two mutes. The front door stood ajar, letting soft vagrant flakes of snow on the chill night air. Young Suffolk lay sprawled on his face on the floor. A tire-tool was beside him. There was some blood. His breathing was heavy and painful. You could hear it with extraordinary clarity through the hush.

Lily said, with intuitive correctness: "I think it's serious, and we'd better not move him. Close the door. Sheffield. Cover him with blankets. Keep him warm."

Lily went to a telephone in the cloak-room. She dialed Starr's number, and he answered directly.

"This is Lily Elsert, Doctor."

His voice was immediately awake, greatly concerned.

"Yes, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Mr. Suffolk, the policeman on guard here has been struck on the head by Mr. Hangaway. I don't like his breathing."

"Are you safe? Is Miss Elsert safe?"

"Yes. He's gone. We found the front door ajar. The police are on the way."

"I'll start at once. I'll arrange for an ambulance and have them get things ready at the hospital. It sounds like concussion."

"Thank you, Doctor. Is there anything we can do right now?"

"Nothing. Don't move him. Keep him warm."

"Yes, Doctor."

There was a small couch in the cloak-room, a brief affair, smugly elegant in striped

satin. Lily lay down on it. She lost consciousness as her head touched it.

Dr. Starr and Mr. Hefferfield were both there. Dr. Starr was sitting beside the bed. Mr. Hefferfield was standing at one of the windows, with his back to it, looking across a shadowed space of room straight at her. Lily saw small sympathy in his look, and for a moment thought it odd. She had been accustomed for so many years to friendly eyes. Dr. Starr's, too, seemed reserved even though they did have sympathy in them, plenty of it.

"How is Nan, Doctor?"

"Fine, Mrs. Elsert. I'd say she was tough as a brick, if it made any sense, but it doesn't. How about you?"

"I'm afraid I fainted."

"You did. You've been up here for a couple of hours."

"Delilah? Sheffield? That poor young policeman?"

"The misery, a bad bruise, and a slight concussion. It was an outrage to get me out of bed."

Lily smiled back, feeling restless through her weakness, and at a disadvantage, lying down like this. She sat up and went into immediate attack against the look in Hefferfield's steady eyes.

"Have you caught him, Mr. Hefferfield?"

He stayed by the window, just straightening a little into a stance of more rigorous formality, with stiff shoulders, and with stiffness in his voice: entirely a different man.

"*Not* yet, Mrs. Elsert. We know he must still be in the vicinity. Nothing is moving. The roads going out of town are completely blocked."

Starr touched Lily's pulse, smiled at her reassuringly.

"Is it wise to talk? Are you sure it wouldn't be better just to rest?"

"But I feel splendid, Doctor."

"Very well. Mr. Hefferfield is somewhat anxious. He has an impression that you can tell him a few things. Don't let him tire you out. Quote me, if you feel he is doing so. Just look at him frigidly and say: 'Doctor's orders.'"

"Thank you, Doctor."

Starr left the room, taking a lot more with him, Lily reflected, than just his body: like a steady anchorage which mists from view beneath the gathering murk of a storm.

"I will join you in my living-room in a moment, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Thank you, Mrs. Elsert."

He bowed slightly, stiffly, and went into the adjoining room, closing the bedroom

door. Lily took off the wrapper and slipped into a teagown, got into stockings, slippers, made swift slight repairs to her hair. The mirror showed her the marks which had been left on her cheek by Hangaway's teeth. She saw that Dr. Starr must have disinfected them, and he had put on some sort of dressing.

("I'm afraid I fainted. You did. You've been up here for a couple of hours.")

Just what, during those two hours, had Nan said? How much had she told? How solidly, by now, was District Attorney Hefferfield entrenched in Detroit? Lily's own special problem never occurred to her, except in its possible repercussions on Nan. Had the child held to her grimly desperate refusal to speak? It was the premise upon which Lily felt it safer to act.

It was a funny thing about a door. Even if you knew what was on the other side of it, actually you didn't know. Lily felt that right now she knew nothing about Mr. Hefferfield at all.

She went into the living-room and found him still standing, stiffly formal. There was no shred of concern in his manner for her, for the appalling experience which she had just been through. He was a portrait of himself, brushed woodenly on canvas by a third-rate hack.

"Will you smoke, Mr. Hefferfield?"

She held out a cloisonné box.

"Thank you, Mrs. Elsert."

"That chair has a degree of comfort. Its shape is deceiving. Actually, it fits."

"Thank you, Mrs. Elsert."

He lighted her cigarette and waited for her to sit down, then permitted himself to be fitted.

"I'm curious to know how Mr. Hangaway escaped from the hospital, Mr. Hefferfield."

"It simply never occurred to them that he would. Or that he wanted to." Hefferfield took two polite puffs and then crushed out the cigarette. "Nor did it occurred to anybody that he would come back here."

"I rather wish that it had."

At long last, and reluctantly, it dragged out of him.

"We're sorry about that, Mrs. Elsert."

"Have you ever read about a typhoon? Either that book of Conrad's, or that one by Hughes about Jamaica?"

"I've read Conrad's yes, Mrs. Elsert?"

"The strongest impression they gave me was that a relatively brief stretch of time could seem so never-ending.

Both books dealt with a question of hours, and yet the feeling was one of an eternity while the storm approached to its height; there was the central lull, and the storm went away."

"You mean that Mr. Parne was killed only yesterday morning, and still—"

"I mean exactly that. The part that terrified me most in both of those books, Mr. Hefferfield, was the lull."

"Yes, there is something frightening in feeling that you've got to face the same thing through again."

"Quite frightening."

"Just why do you feel that way now, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Perhaps because I've had no sleep."

"Only that?"

Lily said with helpless sharpness: "Just how far do you think that nerves can stretch, Mr. Hefferfield?"

"I'm terribly sorry." At the moment he meant it. But the moment was brief, and he was all stiff again. "I'm sorry about this, having to ask you things when I know that you need rest. It's my job. I'm one of the people who are being paid to find out why Parne was killed, and by whom."

"Naturally; and as a matter of fact I don't feel awfully tired. I suppose after you've had no sleep for more than—"

Red flowed slowly up across her cheeks, and Hefferfield said patiently: "For more than how many hours, Mrs. Elsert?"

"It's again the typhoon. Actually I've only been up since eight yesterday morning; but there you are—I feel aged enough to be a stand-in for Methuselah."

He refused to be amused.

"You have already told me that you heard no sound during the night before last. Was that because you slept without waking?"

"Yes. Mr. Parne said good night to my daughter and to me about eleven, and Delilah woke me at eight."

"I would like to go back to Mr. Parne's arrival here in the house."

"Yes?"

"You see, Mrs. Elsert, we have had to give up the thought that Hangaway had anything to do with Parne's death."

"You could find no connection between them?"

"No, it isn't that: that angle may still be there. It's an alibi. I believe you know that filling-station about a mile or so north of here."

"Yes—Oke's."

"Oke?"

"That's what I call the boy who runs it."

Hefferfield permitted this to

expire.

"Well, he read about Hangaway in the evening papers. They carried a good description of Hangaway, also one of those press snapshots. The boy came and saw me around ten o'clock, after he got off. He said Hangaway had stopped over at the filling-station from four in the morning until about half-past seven, when he left for here. Hangaway drank a lot of black coffee and went to sleep in the station."

"Simply no tradition is safe nowadays."

"I know it. He asked the boy quite a lot of questions, Mrs. Elsert. He asked the boy quite a lot of questions, Mrs. Elsert. He asked him how to get to this house."

"But why?"

"I don't know. When he found out that the boy sometimes serviced your car, Hangaway also asked him if your daughter was home. Mrs. Elsert."

"That is odder—it is more absurd still."

"Yes, it would seem so, but he did. The boy said he didn't seem to act as if he knew your daughter, but just was interested as to whether she was home or not. The boy told Hangaway he hadn't seen her, and that as far as he knew, she was still in Detroit."

"I am positive that Nan knows nothing about him."

"Yes, Miss Elsert has told us that she doesn't. Either about Hangaway or Parne. It's quite puzzling. I understand that Parne got here about four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Yes?"

He said suddenly, miserably, with the years and all his stiffness dropping away and leaving him naked in his 'teens: "Can't you see how I hate all this? Questioning you, shaking out all the whole damned bag of tricks in my job? I've always admired you, Mrs. Elsert, and I guess that's stronger than merely liking a person. There's something very right and fine about you, and I can say the same thing about your daughter. Will you be honest with me? Will you make things easier for me by being so?"

Lily felt better, happier, and then infinitely worse; she wanted to tell him everything, not only every act but every feeling and thought and fear that she had endured during the past wretched hours. She wanted to do so not so much because it would make her feel better, but because she thought it would make him feel better. To repay him for this abrupt letting down of

the bars, and this friendly show on his part of wanting to do her a kindness.

Reason checked the flood of words welling up in Lily, and she thought: "I'm a selfish fool. I can't say a thing without endangering the child I love. Just a couple of words of truth, and I might as well never have given her birth, never have fought and struggled through those early tormenting years, never have shaped my course with her as the star to set it by."

She said coldly: "If you will tell me a little more clearly just what you want to know, Mr. Hefferfield? I am sure you will understand my being somewhat confused."

It was a blow in the face, in a way, and he felt it like that, a dash of icy water which made him grow implacable, whereas before he had just felt officially hard.

"I want to know the moves you made concerning Parne's room after he got here, Mrs. Elsert."

"Moves? But I still don't understand!" said Lily. "Delilah arranged the rooms, and Sheffield showed Mr. Parne to his."

"Then we are to understand that you yourself were never in Parne's room?"

(Lily thought swiftly: "He's all business now. I've both antagnized and hurt him. I left fingerprints in the room, beyond the ones on the doorknobs—perhaps on Mr. Parne's luggage when I found Nan's picture. I wiped the gun, the doorknobs, but not the luggage.")

"No, I naturally went up to see whether everything was in order, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Was this after Parne came?"

"Yes. It was after Sheffield had taken Mr. Parne's bags upstairs. While they were both putting the car into the garage. I thought it better to check on towels, linen, the usual things. It's so long since we have used the rooms in the north wing." Lily smiled brightly. "I believe I even became a porter for an instant, and moved Mr. Parne's bags from the floor to the luggage-stand."

"Yes."

(So it had been the bags. He knew that: that she had touched them.)

He said, after a moment: "That would have been shortly after four o'clock—in the afternoon. Did you return to the room later on. Mrs. Elsert?"

"Later? Why?"

"I should like to know."

"There was no occasion to, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Then you want us to un-

derstand that the next time you were there was after Hangaway had told you about finding Parne dead?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind details?"

"No, of course not."

"Tell me what you did that time."

"Why, I just looked in; then I telephoned to Doctor Starr, and the police."

"No—please—more in detail, please."

"But how?"

"I want to know where you stood, how far into the room you walked, how close you went to Parne. That's what I want, Mrs. Elsert."

Lily was deeply puzzled, and clammy with fright. That was all she *had* done: just stood in the doorway and looked at Parne, briefly renewing her impression of the picture which she knew so well. But it was obvious that Mr. Hefferfield felt that some further move had occurred, something on which he seemed to be placing a wealth of importance. Well, at least with this instance she could strick rigidly to the truth.

"I did not go into the room at all, Mr. Hefferfield. I stood in the doorway, as I say, and went no further."

He looked at her with a curious mixture of contempt and pity. There was a dash of horror, too, of the fascinated sort when suddenly in a lovely garden you observe the placid sunning of a pretty snake. He stood up, and for an instant seemed embarrassed.

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Elsert. And good night."

"Good night, Mr. Hefferfield."

Again the stiff half-bow, the oddity of faint rigor in his walk. At the door he turned and glanced at her penetratingly. Once more he said: "Good night."

Ida Forrest heard the faint sound of the telephone bell and was instantly awake.. There was only one instrument in the house, downstairs in what had been her husband Jason's study, and which was now Gene's, except that Gene never used it. This always faintly irked Ida, because she had an orderly mind and liked activities, as well as things, to be in their proper niches.

The telephone went on ringing.

Ida hoped that Gene would not hear it. Normally he would not, as he slept like a log; but Dr. Starr's dinner party had been upsetting emotionally, because of its dark undercurrents, and Gene might easily be spending a restless, sleepless night.

It continued to ring.

Ida knew it would be connected in some fashion with the Elserts. The hour was after three, which automatically divorced the call from ordinary social or business matters and shoved it into the perquisites of drama.

The bell stopped on the seventh ring.

Either they had hung up, or Gene was downstairs answering it, because the regular number of rings was ten. Ida sat upright, in the strictest of nightgowns, and listened more intently. Her hearing was remarkably acute; and soon she caught a faint and remote rumble of Gene's voice. She got out of bed and put on crocheted slippers and a woolen bathrobe, and went out into the cold hall.

Ida's eyes were sharp and frosty with concern, and she said as he came hurrying up the stairs: "What was it, Gene?"

"Lorrimer McKeith, Mother."

"At this hour?" (It was strange, but then it wasn't, really. Besides being an executor of her estate, Lorrimer's sheep's-eyes at Lily during dinner had been obvious enough: the connection with high drama still held.) "What does he want?"

"He's at the Elserts'."

Ida stepped back to let him join her on the landing, and said impatiently: "Of course he is, but what does he want with you?"

"He thinks I ought to be there."

'Why?"

Gene's nut-brown eyes were faintly irritated and dark with worry. He was growing increasingly impatient of apron-strings now that, at twenty-four, middle age had set in. It wasn't that he wasn't very fond of his mother; definitely it wasn't that. It was simply that he *had* to live his own life just once, utterly and completely and without even a minor trammel, before he slipped swiftly into his declining years—with zest all spent.

Capers (now out) had never really satisfied him, because he had always been leashed gently back with looks, with unshed tears, onto the hearth. (Ida was a past master at implication: not even taking second place to the favorite steel engraving of her generation, the Wounded Doe.) Even a knuckling-down to business with old Hendrickson, who was in his dotaged fifties, hadn't helped much, hadn't proved Gene's right as a solid, substantial counselor to an unquestioned management of his own

thoughts and movements and affairs.

It was very discouraging, really, because there were so few avenues of decent escape left to a man except marriage, or the Foreign Legion. Marriage, of course, would have been dandy with Nan and a cottage and a garden, himself the wise and loving master, with Nan clinging to *him*. Well, that dream had gone, leaving the Foreign Legion and what the hell.

"Mr. McKeith said that he was worried about the situation."

"What situation? Why is he there at this hour anyhow?"

"The dope-fiend got loose and broke in."

"Mercy!"

"Yes."

"*Mercy!*"

"He only knocked the cop out. It isn't that."

"What isn't?"

"It's business, Mother."

"Well, what business?"

"Mr. McKeith thinks I ought to be on hand in case they need advice."

"I do wish you'd make sense, Gene. You're not Lorrimer's lawyer, and you certainly aren't the Elserts'."

"I know it. That's just why."

"Why haven't you got your bathrobe on? And no slippers! —Why is it 'just why'?"

"Because Mr. McKeith thinks I could be there as a friend, just pretend that I came because I was worried about what happened to them, and still be handy to give them legal advice. He doesn't want to bring old Wellburn into it, because it would be too obvious—show that they were scared."

"What *did* happen, Gene?"

"Nothing, as I told you, Mother; but Mr. McKeith is a little uneasy about the district attorney's attitude."

"Mercy! Then there was—then she did—"

"No, there wasn't, and she didn't. It's just an attitude. I've got to dress, Mother."

"Gene, I don't want you to go."

"No, I figured you wouldn't. But I'm going, Mother."

"Then I'm going with you."

"No."

Ida permitted the line to run out a little.

"But it will be perfectly all right, Gene. I shall simply be doing what I can for Lily Elsert. Her friends must stand by her at at time like this."

"Mrs. Elsert is asleep."

"I'll be ready by the time you get the car around, dear."

"I'm not taking you, Mother. This is business.

Ida dressed anyhow, rapidly, warmly, sensibly. A fever possessed her to be on hand

and keep Gene from diving overboard into any heroics or sea of pity. Last year when he had first fallen in love with Nan, the match had struck Ida as highly desirable, but she took no chances. It was never in her nature to do so.

She had gone about the difficult business of digging into Lily Elsert's past, and at the Mansion House period of sixteen years ago, had come up against a stone wall beyond which she could not penetrate. Some vista lay there—that much Ida knew; and some day there would be a break in the wall, and the vista would show. For, as Ida also knew, the past never dies.

Here beyond question was that break. It must be: the murder of a stranger, the advent, escape and return of an addict, and District Attorney Hefferfield's "attitude." Ida wanted no part of it for Gene, who still, in her private eyes, wore short trousers. She buttoned tweed and fur more snugly. The young, blessed and impetuous young idiot would always, until the last minute that she lived, have to be saved from himself.

Downstairs, the front door slammed with a bang.

Ida hurried down. She stopped at the coat closet and put on galoshes. Then she stepped out onto the porch to wait for the car. It wasn't so terrifically cold, because the wind had fallen and the snow now fell in languid, endless flakes.

Ida had a great deal of courage, moral courage. It took plenty, because she knew perfectly how Gene felt about her constant, intimate concern for him, for his well-being; and it would have killed her if he ever were to grow away from her, to become actively antagonized. She couldn't help herself, even though there were moments when she knew she was stretching his complaisance to the breaking-point.

Broken links of a chain clattered sharply in the profound stillness, and the car came around the corner from the garage. It did not slow up. Ida called loudly: "Gene—Gene, dear, I'm going with you!" The car went on. The clatter diminished, was muffled up by distance.

She stayed on the porch for a while, mulling this open rebellion, testing its milestone nature, and trying not to be frightened about it. She began to feel not older exactly, but a little old. She impersonally faced the fact that, in May, she would be fifty-six.

How far would affection, would complaisance, really stretch? A barren emptiness of ending years seemed the

gamble; but what, with Nan, would Gene have to face? As the son-in-law of a woman with a shrouded past, and one who was now at least attitudinized into being a murderess and a goal for drug-addicts!

Thoroughly shaken and miserable and frightened, Ida went down the porch steps and along the path to Omega Drive. She headed north, an odd small figure in the huge immensity of the silent night, the drifts, the gentle snow. Her course held a quality of the Last Mile, and she did not delude herself as to her reception by the Elserts, or by Lorrimer, or (the knife twisted painfully) by her son. Still she plodded and stumbled on.

Sheffield's jaw was definitely swollen, and offered Ida the first odd note. He spoke with difficulty, greeting her politely, insisting on removing her galoshes and snow-laden coat. In all the phantasmagoria of the stupefying night, it never occurred to him to question Mrs. Forrest's being there, or to wonder for what purpose, at a quarter to four in the morning, she had come.

"Mr. Forrest is in the living-room with Mr. McKeith and Doctor Starr and Miss Nan, ma'am."

"Thank you, Sheffield."

Ida left Sheffield putting her coat on a hanger, and walked to the living-room doorway. She sensed a funereal hush, a feeling of orderly death in the house, diverse from the electrifying tensions and nervous crises which she had expected and built up during her exhausting walk.

Logs glowed on the large hearth. Lorrimer stood straddled before them toasting: the perfect country gentleman, calm, successfully collected, in the face of all. Dr. Starr, in a near-by club-chair, smoked his pipe. In the shadows, on a rose damask Knole sofa, were Gene and Nan. The quiet sound of their voices died abruptly, and they looked toward the doorway, at Ida.

Ida was pretty good. She walked directly over to Nan and kissed her.

"I thought that at a time like this your mother might need me."

Nan looked into Ida's frosted eyes, and knew.

"Thank you, Mrs. Forrest. Mother is resting."

"For heaven's sake, Ida," McKeith said, "how did you get here? Surely you didn't walk?"

"Why not, Lorrimer? The wind has dropped. After Gene left, I changed my mind, and thought I ought to come."

Starr smiled at her, and of-

fered her a chair.

Though Gene still said nothing, his wind-burned face was setting, slowly, into chalk. Ida smiled at Starr and thanked him for the chair, then sat down with an immeasurable sense of loneliness in this world of her self-devised terrors. She thought: "I'm a terrible fool, I suppose. If he'd only just look at me!"

She said: "Why aren't you resting too, Nan?"

"I tried to, Mrs. Forrest. I can't."

"Mother—"

"Gene?"

"I'll drive you home again. Nan will explain to Mrs. Elsert that you were good enough to come." He continued to look at McKeith rather than at Ida. He said to McKeith: "I don't suppose Mr. Hefferfield will return for at least several hours?"

McKeith held his face beautifully impersonal.

"No, probably not. I think it might be a good idea if you were to come back, though."

"Of course I'm coming back. Nan—how about some air? Come with us, won't you?"

Ida said sharply: "There'll be small pleasure for Nan in bouncing in and out of ruts and drifts, Gene."

It wasn't only Gene: they all seemed against her, ever so politely and in the very nicest way, shoving her out and away from them, pressing her with kindly bred fingers into her remote world of alarms.

"I don't mind, Mrs. Forrest. I'd be glad for some air," Nan said. "I'll be glad to go, Gene."

Starr walked with Ida toward the door. It came as a shock to her to feel, for a moment, his arm about her shoulders, the slightness of a squeeze. An alarming warmth brought the frost in her eyes perilously close to melting.

"Lots of things have a way of working out for the best, Ida."

"I hope you're right, Colin."

"Selfishly, of course, I'm delighted that more people don't realize it. I'd be out of a job if people wouldn't fuss so much. It raised hell with their stomachs."

"Bless you, Colin."

Ida's front door closed on Ida.

Gene was back in the car again alone now, with Nan. It was the darnedest thing, he reflected, how he could feel like this about her, as if he had just met her. How could two months in Detroit (of all places) have changed a woman so? Paris, now, or New York City — heaven alone knew what alterations *they* could make not only in months but

even in a few weeks.

Or London.

He revived his alarm at the return of one girl he knew who had gone over with her parents for the Coronation and had come back with her mouth filled with feathers and hot potatoes. You simply couldn't understand a word she said. Like a barrage of flutes. Very limp.

Well, you could still understand Nan, all right; and yet you couldn't. Her talk was all surface, like a hard pavement spread over what she really meant. In fact, everything about her now seemed hard, and there was a glassy look over her otherwise perfect eyes. It was funny, too, how he still felt crazy about her, even this new hard self.

"Mothers," he said, "surely can be hell."

"Do you think so? I've never found it so."

("Just wait, my rock," he thought, "until you find out the fine mess yours has got herself into. Maybe you think mine's a caution, but just wait.")

"Well, you know the way I mean it, of course."

"Do I?"

"Sure you do. What's come *over* you, Nan?"

"Oh, really, Gene, has anything?"

"You know darn' well there has. Why, I've never seen anything like it. You go away for a mere couple of months, and come back hard as nails. Why did you go? Nan—Nan, honey, tell me why you went to Detroit?"

"Please, Gene! That's all over. You know it's finished."

"No, it isn't. Not with me at any rate."

"Please, Gene."

"Why won't you tell me? I've got to know, Nan. I figured when I saw your mother the other day, that I was washed up. And then I figured maybe she'd stretched things a little. Maybe that she'd made you think you wanted to go to Detroit, and then, when you asked her, she said, you could. But it was her thought, wasn't it, Nan?"

"I went to Detroit because we needed money."

"Golly, don't talk like that. I don't mean the words; I mean the way you say them. Anyhow, that's silly. How did you expect to earn enough money in Detroit to run a joint like yours?"

"I didn't expect to earn it."

"Hey, liste—you what?"

"I did not expect to earn it."

"Well! Our young Miss Raffles, I presume, or is it Kid Two-gun Nancy?"

"Nothing quite so *plein-air*, Gene. It simply struck me

that the field was larger in Detroit than it is around here."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Marriage, of course. What did you think?"

Well, a man certainly never knew. Last month when he'd boggled a ski-jump, and had landed, among other places, on his ear, it had seemed a blow. And now, by comparison, it seemed a pat. The sickening thing was that she meant it. She could put some things on, but she couldn't be that good. Its conviction had a ring. This wonderful, wonderful woman had gone chasing after pelf like a common ordinary tramp. This creature of ice. This metal spike. This—no, not a serpent's tooth.

"And," he said politely, "you found the field was not having any, so you came home?"

"That's right, Gene. It wasn't having any."

"Home to your collection of old gloves and cast-off shoes?"

(Well—oh, my God! She was crying. She was crying fit to bust. Wet, broken noises.)

He stopped the car.

"Hey!"

"Don't touch me."

"I'm not touching you."

"Well, don't."

"Hey—Nan—"

"What?"

"I don't care about Detroit."

No soap.

"Nan—quit that a minute."

"Gene, if you don't take back that arm, I'll get out of this car."

"Like fun you will."

He started the car. She kept right on streaming, and nobody seemed to be getting any place. He reflected bitterly that it was very, very like life. Away you started with a bang, there you were right back again on the line.

"You'd better dry up before you get home."

"I will."

"Look, Nan, there's one thing about me: I'm steady. I don't change, Nan."

"*Please*, Gene."

"All right, Nan."

Starr watched McKeith set the scene. He liked McKeith, and enjoyed him: liked his substantial, fine qualities, and was amused by his foibles. He considered McKeith's habit of dramatizing his several selves as a good thing, as an excellent safety-valve against repressions: the Banker President, the Suave Clubman, the Modest (but still par) Golfer, and—right now—the Old Boy,

standing by.

Standing by Lily Elsert.

He thanked McKeith for replenishing his brandy-and-soda, and watched McKeith replenish his own and then return for further toasting before the logs. The stage, at last, seemed right: intimate, slightly conspiratorial, very man-to-man.

Just how far, Starr wondered, would McKeith stand by Lily Elsert? He would see her through, of course. There was no doubt about that. But what then? What about after the bitter sequences which seemed inevitable? The arrest, the arraignment, the grand jury with its indictment, the waiting weeks in jail, the trial?

Then the verdict.

Starr held no illusions about Hefferfield's opinion or Hefferfield's purpose: all of the sordid sequences were intended to occur. The case against Lily Elsert was closed, with the exception of some single link. Undoubtedly there lay in Hefferfield's possession the most damning of evidence and clue, painstakingly documented and weighed, and ready to strike her down as with a club on the moment when that last link should be obtained.

It was a bond, Starr believed, which would tie her understandably to Parne, one without which the State's case was likely to collapse, because in that bond must be the motive for the crime.

McKeith started his obliques.

"How frequently, Colin, one can paraphrase *Hamlet*."

"To talk or not to talk? That is her problem?"

"Yes; and I am afraid we must consider that it truly is. I honestly don't know what to advise Lily to do. I'm sure we both agree that Hefferfield is a very sound, a very intelligent man."

"Also an open-minded and a just one."

"Yes, and it's quite obvious that he's simply waiting, just marking time."

"For the link? You feel that too?"

"For whatever it is that connects Lily with those men. We've got to face that, of course—the fact that neither Parne nor Hangaway came to this house through mere chance."

"Why specifically Mrs. Elsert, Lorrimer? Have you thought of the possibility that the tie-up might lie through her daughter?"

"Nan? Absurd. She's a child."

"No, not any longer. Up to the time when she left for Detroit, if you wish. She's a

woman now."

"Oh, come, she's only nineteen."

"That was Mrs. Elsert's age when Nan was born."

"Well — you're right. It really had never occurred to me."

He said to Starr: "We may need your help. I don't mean medically; I mean in the way you've handled those other criminal cases around town."

"Gladly, Lorrimer."

"Thank you, Colin. Although I don't know what under the sun you could do."

"I don't myself. The medico-legal angles of Parne's death were childishly obvious." Starr added uncomfortably: "They lacked the most elementary professional touch."

"I know what you mean. But we'll fight up to the last."

"Of course."

"Does nothing strike you? Nothing at all?"

"No, I can't. I won't believe it."

"And I cannot eliminate the thought. It persists in nagging me. Look here—you play chess, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, think of your pawns."

Crisp and faintly sharp from the deathlike stillness of the outer night came the metallic clatter of a chain.

"I want you to explain that, Colin. Not right now, however, for they're coming back."

The clatter grew loud, definitive; it increased. It stopped on a single loud clap. The front door opened and closed, and after their coats had been disposed of, Nan and Gene came in. They both showed strain, and Nan at once excused herself and said she was going upstairs to try and get a little rest, McKeith caught again with a rush of relief the faint hint of a curtsey as she said good-night, and then she was gone, and Gene announced that if ever a man needed a drink, he was that man. He poured himself a stiff brandy-and-soda.

Ten minutes later they heard the scream.

He too, as Parne had been, was freshly dead.

He was a well-built man in his late forties, conservatively, expensively dressed, with a stubble of beard on his chin, and a dusty, rumpled look about his clothing. He lay on his back just as Parne had lain, and his eyelids were slightly opened, showing crescents of an oyster white. A black hole in his temple oozed blood. He was not lying, as Parne had been, across the bathroom sill, but was stretched at length between the bed and one of the win-

dows.

Blankets and sheets lay in a heap on the floor. The mattress had been slit in a dozen places from which its stuffings had been explored and pulled. The pillows were half empty of their feathers.

There were two guns. One was gripped in the dead man's hand. The other was in Nan's.

Only the bed-lamp burned.

Lily reached the room first, the room which for one night had been Mr. Parne's. She had caught the sound of footsteps pounding up the broad curved stairs as she had run past the landing. She would have one instant of grace out of eternity, while they determined where to look for the source of the scream.

Lily took the gun out of Nan's hand and held it in her own. Its metal felt warm to the touch, and a slight and acrid tang of powder still hung in the air. She opened a window swiftly and threw the gun far out into the banks of snow, then closed the window and gathered Nan tightly into her arms. She murmured incoherently:

"Be still, darling. Say nothing—nothing! Be still, my dear—be still—"

Gene's shout brought the other two men, brought Sheffield, but not (the thought struck Lily briefly) Delilah. It was a stilted scene which revolved around and before Lily slowly in a stunned sort of confusion: Starr on a knee by the body, examining, pronouncing the man dead. Gene and Lorrimer looking blankly stricken. And only Sheffield looking dispassionate and tired.

Starr stood up and said gravely: "Do you know who this is, Mrs. Elsert?"

Lily hadn't looked. She went closer to the body, and Nan still clung to her, moving the few steps as she moved, clinging to her in a torment of intermittent shaking. Lily looked. It was strange to be able to stand there quietly, and look not at the man so much as through him, and through that filter, backward and further backward through the years. Heavier, solider, more flesh about the jowls (which had been lean and curiously fascinating and strong as a beast of prey's), but—yes, she knew him.

"He is Nan's father, Doctor."

So — Starr thought — the link.

Well, then, here was the end.

All of the swing through the past nineteen years was over, and there Lily felt herself right back at the start—

with Robert! Plumper, jowlier, less excitingly feral, and dead; but still Robert. . . . She reflected on its cruelty and deep injustice: that a biological trap which so many years ago had sprung and inflicted its scars should have the power once more to reopen them.

Lily thanked Starr for the tablet, for the glass of water, and leaned back with a lassitude of dead indifference on the *chaise-longue* in her upstairs living-room, her face pallid and o d d l y serene against a champagne-toned French corduroy. Starr drew a chair up close. He offered Lily a cigarette, for which she thanked him, but which she refused.

"Our time may be brief, Mrs. Elsert."

"I know that, Doctor."

"I have told Lorrimer that I will do everything I can."

Lily was vaguely glad that he should want to, and that Lorrimer should have asked him. It was terribly difficult to attempt to concentrate. Her head seemed to have gone to sleep, the way a leg can, and she thought that if she were to move it even slightly, it would begin to hurt and tingle. The present, too, was asleep: Lorrimer and Starr, and murder and another murder and Laurel Falls. Only the past was awake, and only the dead Robert possessed the attributes of life.

"Doctor Starr, do you believe in fate?"

"Yes."

"You do? You, a physician, believe in it?"

(Starr thought: "She's at it again, like all of them. There's no time for this. If I'm to help her in the slightest fashion, I must know everything which tonight, and yesterday, and years of yesterdays, she has husbanded in her secret mind. I dare not jounce her—again, the trouble with the stubborn brutes! —I must let her drift along.")

"Fate is a term," he said, "that scientists hold in a bondage of disrepute, simply for the protection of their precious formulæ and equations. They insist on the inflexible rule. It's their mental as well as their physical bread and butter."

"Physicians also?"

"Yes, to a lesser degree. I'm sometimes inclined to wonder whether the alchemists didn't pull off a sounder job than we do, by kissing the occult on both cheeks, whereas we only peck at one of them. But for heaven's sake, don't quote me."

Lily smiled faintly.

"I sha'n't. Well, I am a victim of it."

"I felt so, obscurely. As I say, we've little time. There are many confusions." Starr added earnestly, "Won't you clear them for me, Mrs. Elsert?"

"I think you ought to know that I did not tell a literal lie when I came here. There was a basis of probability, of reason."

"When you came to Laurel Falls?"

"Yes, sixteen years ago. I called myself a widow. I had begun to hope, in fact to feel, an assurance by that time that I was one."

(Starr thought: "She's getting at it. I still can't press her or she'll dry up. We've only ten or fifteen minutes, at the best.")

"You believed that your husband, that Robert Wardley, was head?"

"It was kinder to believe that. Much kinder."

"Why, Mrs. Elsert?"

"He left me on the night Nan was born. This will seem strange to you, Doctor, but I never realized until then how much I must have loved him. I knew it because his leaving me hurt so."

"And he?"

"Oh, Robert never loved me at all. That's obvious, isn't it?"

"I don't know. There are so many aspects. Any number of things can dam up love temporarily, and still it will flow again if it gets a chance. I've known of cases at childbirth where a man has hated his wife because he was hating himself for what she was going through. Sort of a defense-complex thing. Did you never hear from him?"

"Nothing."

He left her sinking for a moment in this torment of the past, and reflected how pointedly Robert Wardley's death would motivate Hefferfield's case: bigamy, the scandal of it reflected, no matter how innocently, on Lily and on Nan; no district attorney could want a better handle.

"Did you accept his death as a fact, Mrs. Elsert, or did you take any steps to try and prove it?"

"I had a little money, Doctor. Too little for my exhaustive and expensive search. I think that even if I had had a great deal of money, I would have been ashamed to use it in that way. I waited for five years, and then got a divorce on the grounds of desertion. Naturally, the case was uncontested. I waited two more years, Doctor, and then arranged that he be declared legally dead. That was in 1929, four years before my marriage to Milton."

Starr felt profound relief.

"But Mrs. Elsert, that's splendid. Don't you see? There goes the mainstay of Hefferfield's case."

(Lily thought: "O, no, it doesn't. It isn't as simple as that. It's as complicated as Parne, as Hangaway, as Detroit, as Robert's dead body, as the three of them all converging out of Detroit and into this house.")

"I wish, Doctor, that it could be so."

She was right, of course, and Starr felt his exhilaration draining away, because motives for any murder could be legion, whereas authenticated proofs were rare as truth, and Hefferfield must hold a lot of them in his hand. He studied Lily's limp indifference toward the deadly urgency of her position.

He thought: "We've all been focused on her. She has held us like a strong beam shining in twilight. She has obscured the *mise-en-scene*. . . . Can that be it? *Can that be it?*"

Hefferfield had read several biographies of public executioners, and considered them distasteful to a point that touched on the horrendous. During his two terms in office he had only once, metaphorically, wielded the ax himself. He had asked a jury to give a man a verdict of death. The jury had, and now the man was dead. The man had shouted at him: "It's you, not them, that kill me. Just because you are bright."

And now he had to be bright again.

He wondered if when the time came Lily would shout something at him too. The probability seemed incredible, just as did the fact that Lily's loveliness and gentle nature and all-around kindness was nothing but a deceit!

Hefferfield made his voice purposefully sharp.

"Mrs. Elsert."

"Yes?"

"We have reached a point where I am restricted to every legal nicety of my office."

"Yes?"

"I want you to know your rights. I want you to reconsider, if you wish, your decision against having Gene Forrest here to advise you."

"But I still see no reason why I should, Mr. Hefferfield."

This irritated him into a gesture of genuine impatience.

"Really, Mrs. Elsert, I know why Forrest's here. I know why Lorrimer McKeith suggested his coming."

"You must appreciate Gene's interest in my daughter."

He said again: "Oh, really! We both know that's an eva-

sion. If you won't have him up here, you won't. I shall advise you that my secretary is taking this inquiry down verbatim, and that all or any part of it may later be used. This is simply another way of saying that anything—"

"I know. I do not want to seem rude, but I know, Mr. Hefferfield."

"All right, then. Why did your husband come here, Mrs. Elsert?"

"I'm sorry, but I honestly do not know. I did not even know that he was living until I saw him in that room. And then he was dead."

"Why did you go to the room?"

"I—" ("Nan screamed, and I heard Nan scream, and I ran to the room and saw Nan with the gun in her hand.") "I don't know."

"Why did you scream when you got there?"

"Because of what I saw when I turned on the lights." ("That's right, *I* screamed. It was *my* scream that brought Nan running, brought the rest running.") "There was the general disorder—Robert lying on the floor, shot."

"Then you recognized him immediately?"

"No—not until Doctor Starr asked me whether I knew him."

"And still you did recognize that this strange man lying on the floor was dead?"

"Yes."

"And that he had been shot?"

"Yes."

"In other words, you were close enough to observe the bullet-hole, and still you did not recognize him as your husband?"

"I didn't then. Not then."

"Your daughter joined you?"

"Yes. Nan heard my scream."

(What did he know? Had he questioned Nan? What had she told him?)

"How long were you and she together before the others came?"

"It could scarcely have been a matter of seconds."

"When did you raise the window? Before or after your daughter came?"

"Window?"

"Please, Mrs. Elsert. You must place some credence in our efficiency. Your fingerprints were on it. They were not on it earlier in the day when the room was examined in connection with Parne."

"I remember about that now, Mr. Hefferfield. It is really inconsequential. I felt faint. I raised the window for air, and then closed it again."

"Before you screamed?"

"No; naturally, afterward.

After the shock."

"But before your daughter came?"

"Yes."

"We've tested it, Mrs. Elsert, and it has been estimated that between your screaming and the arrival of Doctor Starr and Lorrimer McKeith and Gene Forrest, not more than eight or nine seconds could have elapsed. And yet you want us to understand that you screamed, you felt faint, so you opened the window and were revived, and then you closed it again, all before your daughter arrived, all within the implausibly short space of three or four seconds?"

"I'm afraid I must."

"Why did your husband come here?"

"You have already asked me that."

"Can you suggest any reason, even though you know of no definite one?"

"No, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Would you prefer us to accept a statement from you that you opened the window to throw something out into the snow?"

"No—no—, I felt faint. I've told you that too."

"People have the funniest notions about the concealing qualities of snow. They think it just swallows things up, and that's the end of it. They think a subsequent fall, or a continued fall of flakes will cover all traces. Well, in some cases it does."

"Yes?"

"But there are ways. The snowfall since you opened the window has been negligible, Mrs. Elsert. There's that to begin with. Then there was the light."

"Light?"

"Shaft, really. We took a spotlight and shafted it almost horizontally over that area covered by the window. It narrowed the field amazingly by showing the indentations and making them quickly obvious. We found this by digging."

Hefferfield took a gun from his pocket and placed it on the piecrust table beside their chairs. Lily looked at it. It looked like the gun, all right; and the spotlight business did make sense. It irked her strangely to have to remain so stubborn, so willfully unseeing, but there was no other course. She could admit nothing, to agree to no point whatever, without her whole defence crumbling and leaving, not her, but Nan naked to the State's attack.

"I understand your contention, Mr. Hefferfield. I do not admit any knowledge of that gun, and certainly I refuse to change any statement that a

feeling of faintness caused me to open the window."

"Just as you wish, Mrs. Elsert."

He left the gun lying there for Lily to look at, in the accepted tactic of it being a disturbing factor to prod her sense of guilt, and in the hope that it would help him swiftly to break her down. As the ax must fall, he wanted to wield it quickly, to have this former deeply admired friend confess *in toto* her horrific sins and throw herself upon the mercy of the State, accept a lesser plea and languish for twenty-odd years at some penal tasks, but at least escape with her life. As he would then in turn escape from her ultimate and nerve-destroying shout when the death-penalty would be imposed. He held no question as to Lily's guilt, but he did hope for palliative circumstances, and he wanted to find them out.

"Let us go back, Mrs. Elsert—way back. To when you and your daughter came here to Laurel Falls."

"I've done so just now, Mr. Hefferfield, to Doctor Starr."

"Then repeat it, please, for me."

Lily did. She gave him the bones of the framework with their dates, and ignored any of the flesh, which was the really important thing and consisted of her years of distress when she had suffered as a brutally deserted woman. Hefferfield considered them briefly in silence.

"I feel better, Mrs. Elsert. We return to a normal groove. I am accepting your statement as to the divorce and the legal declaration of your husband's death, because both can be checked at their documentary sources. Frankly, it spoils my thoughts on a motive. Equally frankly, it presents me with a more unpleasant one."

"You will forgive me if I fail to follow you?"

"It occurs to me that the coming of Parne and Hangaway and your first husband to this house begins to make sense. We have Parne's initial interest in the Sheraton secretary. We have your husband's search of the room which Parne occupied and in which he was killed. I refer to the slits in the mattress and the opened pillows, the general disorders of a search. Papers, documents of some nature, naturally spring to mind. Equally so, your documentary proofs of the divorce and the declaration of legal death also spring to mind. I suppose you kept them here, Mrs. Elsert? Or are they at the bank?"

"No, I kept them here. Be-

cause of my early contention of being a widow, I preferred to hold them privately."

"Where?"

"I have kept them since Mr. Elsert's death in the Sheraton secretary."

"Well, we've searched it, and there's nothing of their nature there. Or are there secret compartments?"

"No. There is a locked drawer for more private papers. I kept them in that."

"Yes, I know the drawer. It has been forced. By Parne, I imagine."

Deeply bewildered and puzzled, Hefferfield frowned. He forgot for a moment, in his concentration on the problem, the relationship that currently existed between himself and Lily, with himself a bloodhound baying slaveringly after this once delightful, delightful, delicate creature as she skipped with such pitiful indecision across her perilous and tipsy cakes of ice. His manner changed to one of a man who is having an impartial discussion about a knotty problem with a friend.

He said: "I suppose we must consider it that way, that Parne found them in the secretary and took them, and that your first husband was looking for them when he was shot. Only why? Can't you see how foolish it is?"

Lily couldn't. She was beyond seeing anything much—that is, as to its folly or brightness; and a dreadful, passionate longing to go away some place and lie down and sleep was betraying her again. She meditated about this absently, thinking it queer; because of all times, it was right now when she should be lively and electric, and in all ways on her mettle, ready with parry and thrust to beat off this important gnat who was bent on destroying her.

"In what way is it foolish, Mr. Hefferfield?"

"Because they are not documents - of - source. Anybody could go to the place where you got your divorce and look it up in the official records; and it's stupid to consider that *they* could be done away with."

He looked for understanding in this now impartial friend and saw none. Her lovely eyes with their deep shades of blue and violet seemed a touch out of focus, and windowed with glass. He wondered for a scandalized moment whether she had been paying any attention to him at all, or had just remained wrapped up in her glassy daze and throwing him mechanized replies in the manner of an intelligent automaton.

He said sharply: "The same thought holds true, of course, with the legally dead business. So why all this frantic to-do about getting hold of your copies?" An odd idea took shape in his mind, and he stared at her strangely. "Why do you call that man Robert Wardley, Mrs. Elsert? Don't you know that his name is Worthby Hainestead?"

Lily's pale face grew paler as the blood left it slowly; and she thought, becoming at once awake: ("That's the name Mr. Hangaway asked Nan about. He asked her if she knew Worthby Hainestead, and Nan said no. He asked her how she had got wise to Worthby Hainestead. He asked her how much she had shaken him down for. He had said to Nan: 'Hainestead is hard—as you know. He'd see to it that somebody wrapped you up in cement just as quick as he'd pick a daisy. You'd better turn the proof over to me.' ")

"Worthby Hainestead? I'm afraid not, Mr. Hefferfield. I have never known Robert otherwise than as Robert Wardley."

"Were the divorce and the other papers issued under that name?"

"Yes."

"And the name Worthby Hainestead, Worthby Hainestead of Detroit, means nothing to you, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing, Mr. Hefferfield."

He seemed unbelieving and astounded that it should not, and Lily thought that Robert —or now Worthby Hainestead—must be a man of some importance. She tried to imagine Robert, her earlier cruel and ferally exciting Robert, as being now a man of importance, with his (she hoped) unique tendency toward putting people in cement.

A startled look of sudden shock spread over Hefferfield's face.

"Mrs. Elsert, why did you send your daughter to Detroit?"

"I didn't. I didn't send her. Nan herself suggested going. She won a design contest conducted by our newspaper. She is a graduate in fashion design. That is why Nan went to Detroit, Mr. Hefferfield."

With the very essence of her heart Lily tried to have Hefferfield believe this, because so far as she knew, it was true, and she wanted to make the truth of it so ringing that he would have to accept it. She watched the alarm fade from his face, and his expression change to one of disgust and pity, like the look, she reflected, reserved

for all the feet that ever were of clay.

He started addressing a jury, not Lily.

He said: "The roots of these crimes lie in this house, Mrs. Elsert. They lie in those documentary proofs. But the tree and the branches spread over Detroit. Parne and Hangaway are shadowed by them, and so is the man who you call Wardley and whom I know to be Hainestead."

("Lord," he thought, "but this is silly. I'm talking to her as though I were summing up. She ought to throw me out of the house. She can't. She can't do a thing but sit there and listen to me, to my cheap pseudo-oratory, and hold her neck out until it pleases me to slice it with an ax.") He was back to that image again, the bloodhound rôle no longer of use, because he had her. He had her right on the block. He wanted to apologize for his bombast, but did not dare permit himself the least weakening into softness. He took some notes from his pocket and studied them for a while.

He said to Lily: "A shorthand transcript wasn't kept the last time I questioned you, but this is approximately what you told me, Mrs. Elsert. I shall ask you the same questions again, and my secretary will take down your answers. Please consider them well, as you may care to answer differently than you did before."

"I feel certain that I sha'n't, Mr. Hefferfield."

"This is about the way it went: I asked you what you did concerning Parne's room after he got here. You said you went up to it while he and Sheffield were putting his car in the garage. You checked the linen. You lifted his bags from the floor to the luggage-stand. The only other time you went to the room was immediately after Hangaway had told you about finding the body. You then went up and stood in the doorway, but did not enter the room at all. I guess that was about it."

"Yes. It still is, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Wait, please. I shall put the questions to you somewhat differently, and Mr. Minkle will take down your answers. When you went upstairs to check the room, had Parne been in it as yet?"

"No, he did not go up until after he had put the car in the garage."

"Now, in regard to his bags, Mrs. Elsert. Sheffield has told me that he placed them on the luggage-stand. You tell me that you did."

"I'm afraid that Sheffield is mistaken. Perhaps I am myself mistaken. The matter

seems very unimportant. So very many more important things have happened."

"Still, if you will forgive me? Were the bags unpacked?"

"No."

"Why did you search them, Mrs. Elsert?"

("Because I was looking for a gun or hot money or a case of dope, and later I searched them looking for the letters he had written in the library and which might contain references which would connect him with Nan, and this later time, I found the cabinet photograph of Nan which had been taken in Detroit. You can see how that proved that there *was* something between them. Are pieces of cardboard carried away completely, or do they sometimes remain, and do the police examine the traps and the drains as a routine procedure in the expectation of finding just such incriminating things?")

"But I didn't search the bags, Mr. Hefferfield."

Hefferfield went off on a tangent. He said angrily, in anger at the entire situation: "There is this about a person's statement, there is this about the truth, about knowing anyone personally and believing him a truthful person. You catch him out in a lie, even in a little lie, but you know it to be a deliberate one. Everything else he says, everything he has told you before, collapses. Surely you understand that?"

"Of course I do."

"And still you tell me that you did not search the bags, and that they were not unpacked. And still your fingerprints are all over the smooth leather of the case in which Parne kept his toilet-articles, a case which had not been unpacked, but which was inside his Gladstone bag. What in heaven's name do you want me to think, Mrs. Elsert?"

"If you will give me one moment—"

"I will give you all the time you like."

Not that one moment or one year or one eternity would do any good. What was the use of a respite, no matter how long, if you were to spend it in this state of utter unliveliness—for she was back in *that* condition again—and were incapable of anything but the most febrile sort of fencing, because your head was asleep and all the rest of you was dead on its feet.

"As I have said, Mr. Hefferfield, there were so many more important things which have intervened—but I must have lifted the bags to the luggage-rack, not Sheffield—

you both forget and imagine things easily after you've turned a century, and some people believe that Sheffield has. And the dressing-case must have fallen out of the Gladstone when I lifted it. I am certain that the bags were open, Mr. Hefferfield. I can swear that the bags were open."

He looked at this puny effort and brushed it aside. What under the sun did she take him for? A complete chump?

"Do you know anything about blood, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Blood?"

"About the four groups into which it's divided?"

"Yes, in a general fashion. You read so much nowadays about blood donors. Some people make quite a living out of it, don't they?"

He snapped a "Yes" and stuck to business.

"The groups are called One, Two, Three and Four. Sometimes they are referred to as Group O, Group A, Group B, and Group AB. It happens that Group AB is rare."

"Is it, Mr. Hefferfield?"

He wanted to stick not one, but many and long pins into her.

"Parne's blood was of Group AB."

"Yes, Mr. Hefferfield?"

"I shall ask you this, Mrs. Elsert: While Parne was alive, were you at any time in his room while he himself was in it?"

"No."

"Now, after Parne was killed, you tell us that you stood on the threshold of his room but did not enter it. I shall ask you, did you in any fashion contact his body? I shall forget all former statements, Mrs. Elsert."

Lily saw now where this was heading. It hadn't been simply blood which she had rinsed out down the sink, but a rare and special kind of AB blood with which, surprisingly, Mr. Parne had been filled. Surprisingly, because nothing else about him had struck her as rare. She said after several moments, coming up from nightmare depths like swimming up through smothering treacle to a surface which would even be worse: "Yes, I think I did."

"Just tell me about it. As you now remember it, Mrs. Elsert."

"I think the shock, the fear at later finding blood on the sleeve of my negligée, I think that is what has kept me from mentioning this before."

"Yes, Mrs. Elsert?"

"I did go into the room. My memory continues to be confused because of the excessive

faintness I felt at the time. I think I tried to determine whether Mr. Parne was still alive. The blood stained my negligée then."

"How?"

"How?"

"Yes, Mrs. Elsert, how?"

"Why—by coming in contact with the wound, I suppose."

"My dear Mrs. Elsert," (pins, even the longest of them, were too short, and he wanted spikes), "Parne was on his back. He had been shot in the back. There was no wound of exit in his chest. There was no blood on his chest. What blood there was lay beneath him on the floor."

"Then—I must have put an arm beneath him."

"Yes?"

"To raise him up."

"Yes?"

"To see whether he was still breathing."

"Minkle!"

"Sir?"

"Find Miss Elsert, please. Ask her if she will join us."

"Yes sir."

"No—not Nan, Mr. Hefferfield. Ask me what you like, but please not Nan, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Sorry, Mrs. Elsert. Go get her, Minkle."

Hefferfield said briefly: "It's about Detroit."

Nan said: "Yes?"

"And about your father."

"Yes, Mr. Hefferfield?"

"I want you to tell me first about your father."

"But how?"

"Tell me everything you remember about him."

"But I don't. I don't remember anything."

"Miss Elsert, you are young. We've both known each other casually for a good many years. I can remember seeing you as a very little girl as far back as the Mansion House. I've seen you grow. And—well, mature."

(She had, too, now that he had pinned the thought down with words. There was a riper look which had supplanted her general legginess and other awkward-colt effects, a sort of tightening up and smoothing out. All this on the surface of course, and he imagined that the same processes must have been also going on inside; otherwise she never could have got herself involved in this infernal mess.)

He went on a bit less paternally: "I am telling you as I've told your mother, that my job here is distasteful. It is especially so from the fact that I know both of you and have always liked you. I realize that the truth is hard, but I earnestly want you to ap-

preciate that you will be doing yourself a kindness in the end by sticking to it." He added uncomfortably, as if wishing to make untrue a fact about which he had no doubts: "There is no escape."

Lily said: "Nan, darling, would you like Gene to be up here with us?"

"Oh, *no*, Mother. Why?"

"To advise us, dear. To advise us what to say?"

"Oh, *please* no, Mother. Honestly, Mr. Hefferfield, the first thing I knew about Father, even about such people as fathers, was when Mother told me that mine was dead. I think I must have been about four or five then, Mother?"

"Yes, darling."

"Four or five." Hefferfield made mental calculations. "Five—that would be the year, or rather at the end of it, when your mother obtained her divorce. You were told about that, of course, Miss Elsert?"

Lily said sharply: "No! Nan has never known."

"But I did, Mother."

Lily looked blank and stunned. She thought: "Nan has known about it all these years. She has known that her father was alive. She has said nothing. Never by any word has she indicated this knowledge." It was an affront, rather, and verged on duplicity, a lingering duplicity that had obviously continued through adolescence right down to now. It occurred to her how right Nan was about the littleness with which they truly knew each other.

"Did your mother tell you about the divorce, Miss Elsert?"

"No, Mr. Hefferfield. I don't think either you or Mother appreciates how much a girl of five or six really knows. I think when people get older, I mean a lot older, that they forget about the time when they were five or six themselves, that they had thoughts and wants and feelings even then, really strong feelings, Mr. Hefferfield, and that they could figure things out. They forget all that and simply—well, they make pets of boys and girls—like animals—"

"Darling!"

"It's *true*, Mother."

"You still haven't told me, Miss Elsert. I mean about how you knew?"

"That was perfectly simple, Mr. Hefferfield. I simply saw the papers on Mother's desk and read them. I just wanted you to understand."

"Understand?"

"Yes, why I kept it a secret. Because I knew it was a secret of Mother's, and I didn't want to *violate* it. I would

dream and think about it, and I know now how young I was about it, and how I dramatized it, how I thought of my mother as a tragic figure, and how much it made me love her, and how much—how much—"

"Darling!" (How unspeakable to have thought it duplicity, to have been even faintly affronted!) "Oh, Nan darling—"

This, thought Hefferfield, is simply fierce. Even Minkle's lush eyes seemed damper than usual. As for Lily and Nan Elsert, in an instant the two of them were likely to be dissolved, fused in the saltiest of floods, and his ax would fall through butter. He thought: "I am as fit to be a district attorney as a marshmallow puff." He hadn't the faintest idea what such a thing was, but it sounded right.

"Miss Elsert!"

"Yes, Mr. Hefferfield?"

"Are you getting this, Minkle?"

Minkle gave him a moist nod.

"Did you also know that your father had been declared legally dead, Miss Elsert?"

"Yes, I knew about that too."

"Now I want you to tell me, please, the real reason for your having gone to Detroit."

"Why, I won a contest—"

Hefferfield deliberately forced himself to be rude. How else could you remain unmelted? He broke in on Nan impatiently with: "I know that. You won a contest in fashion design, and being a graduate in fashion design, you went to Detroit and got jobs in fashion design on the strength of it. Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, Miss Elsert. You had a home here. Your friends are all here. Your mother was left alone here—your mother, who had but briefly been bereft of her husband. You left her in that state of grief. Why?"

"My mother had also been left almost penniless, Mr. Hefferfield."

"Oh, come—really, please, I don't know what sort of commissions you made with your designing; but surely, Miss Elsert, they'd be drops in a bucket?"

"Nan darling, really dear, I never knew."

"There's a lot you've never known, Mother, I *will* tell you why I went to Detroit, Mr. Hefferfield. I went there to get money. I went to get a lot of money."

Hefferfield thought, now that the truth was at long last popping out at him: "I know you did. I knew it, you poor, wicked, sweet, nice kid!" (For she still *was* a kid, no matter

how apparently a ripening one.)

"Make money by what means, Miss Elsert? I take it you had other plans than just fashion design?"

"Naturally."

"Well?"

"I sha'n't tell you. I simply won't tell you, Mr. Hefferfield. I've had one person despise me, and I simply shall not have you despise me, and I shall not have Mother. Or Mr. Minkle."

("Now, dear God!" thought Hefferfield.)

"Miss Elsert."

"Yes?"

It was like water. You got your hands on something that looked solid, and away it ran through your fingers. There was a bitter sort of comfort in knowing that you could put a stop to all such leakage by freezing it.

"How did you get on to the fact that Worthby Hainestead of Detroit was your father, Robert Wardley?"

"I didn't."

"Your mother told you, didn't she?"

"Mother? But this is sheer madness, Mr. Hefferfield!"

"Please, Miss Elsert, we're not dramatizing now. For God's sake, please realize how serious this is. Two men are dead. They have been killed. They have been murdered—in this house."

Nan suddenly stopped looking mature. She dropped her pitiful cloak of being a fallow and an efficient woman of the world, and shriveled into a terrified child.

"Yes, I know."

"Oh, *Nan darling*."

"It's all right, Mother."

"Please, Mrs. Elsert, I'm handling this. You ask me to accept your statement that you did not know that Hainestead was your father, Miss Elsert, so I must do so. Will you also ask me to believe that you did not know Worthby Hainestead to be your father?"

"No, I knew him to be Worthby Hainestead. But I never *knew* him, Mr. Hefferfield. I told Mr. Hangaway that I didn't know him, didn't I, Mother?"

"Nan!"

"Oh—so you told Hangaway that, Miss Elsert?"

"Yes."

"I see."

He didn't see, of course, but the fact in a vague fashion seemed to fit, as any fact might fit in the obvious combine of Hangaway, Hainestead, and Parne. And, naturally, the two Elserts.

He said: "Just what do you mean by the statement that you knew him but you didn't

know him?"

"I didn't *meet* him."

"Your dealings with him were through Parne, then, or Hangaway? They were your go-betweens?"

"Nan—don't answer that, Nan!"

Hefferfield slammed his clenched fist down on the pie-crust table. It became no longer a table. He ignored the wreckage. He ignored everything but his great confusion and his hot sudden anger. He ignored Nan. His hot, badgered eyes blazed directly at Lily, no longer lovely or a friend. A common murderess.

"Here's my last question for the record, Mrs. Elsert."

"Yes, Mr. Hefferfield?"

"Get this carefully, Minkle!"

"Yes sir."

"Mrs. Elsert, I have you on record for the following false statements: You opened the window on discovering Hainestead's body because you felt faint. A lie: you opened it to throw the gun out. You did not recognize the gun; but your fingertips are on it. Now go back. You lifted Parne's luggage onto the stand. I believe, on the contrary, that Sheffield's statement is correct and that it was he who did so. You did not search Parne's bags. Your fingerprints are on the toilet-article case that was in his Gladstone, so you did search his bags. Now the blood."

"Please—I beg of you, Mr. Hefferfield, I want Nan to go."

"I want her to stay. I repeat, the blood — Parne's blood. You stated you never entered the room after his death. His blood is on the sleeve of your negligée. So you tell us you lifted him up, by shoving your arm beneath his back, to see whether he was still breathing. Mrs. Elsert, no child, and God knows, no jury, would believe any stuff like that."

"Go, Nan darling—"

"Stay right where you are, Miss Elsert. Mrs. Elsert, I am giving you your last chance. I submit to you that you were not only in Parne's room after Hangaway had told you about finding the body, but you were there *at the time of Parne's death!*"

"No—"

"I'm asking you to confess. I'm begging you to confess, Mrs. Elsert."

"No—"

Hefferfield's anger, his stuffed feeling of pumping blood, the hot ringing in his head, all dropped from him, leaving him a little shaken and weak. He shrugged faintly in a gesture of resignation which was, paradoxically, one of de-

feat at the very moment of his indisputable triumph.

He said quietly: "After you shot Parne, Mrs. Elsert, you wiped your fingerprints off the gun. You then dragged Parne's body to the hall door and placed his fingerprints on the two knobs. It was an awkward and an obvious job. The sleeve of your negligée became bloodied in that fashion. You dragged Parne back to the spot where he had fallen and then placed the gun in his hand."

His mouth had an ashy dryness, and he tried to moisten it by swallowing, before going on: "I will tell you how I know this: I already explained to you that your fingerprints were clearly found on the smooth leather of his toilet-article case. Well, they were also clearly found on the smooth leather of his bedroom slippers, which came off his feet while you were dragging his body, and which you put back on his feet after you had accomplished your stupid purpose." He ended, almost lamely, almost apologetically: "As I have said, there is no escape."

Lily did not look at Nan. She could tell pretty well, without having to see it, about how Nan would be looking. She hoped in her great despair that Nan would not speak, but in her heart of hearts she waited for the word from Nan that would save her—ready to deny it, to deny anything that Nan would say, but wanting the love and the feeling and the comfort of it even if only to remember during that interval when she would be, to all human purposes, alone. She waited just a little while. And then she said: "How long will I have, Mr. Hefferfield?"

He said miserably: "There is no special rush, Mrs. Elsert. There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't stay here, in your home, while I'm arranging about the warrant. You can get your things in order." He started to hold out his hand, and then drew it back, flushing hotly. "I'll come for you, Mrs. Elsert."

Ida Forrest found them in each other's arms. Such, at least, was the accepted description for the knot they seemed to be tied up in when she came through the kitchen door. Anyhow, her son's arms were twisted in some complicated fashion with that girl's arms, and he was saying, "There, there, *there!*" at a great rate. Miss Elsert (as Ida now preferred to think of her, no matter how visibly

Nan was being installed into a daughter-in-law stage) was because of a general wetness saying nothing.

They remained unaware of her presence, and Ida made no move to announce herself, further than by just standing inside the doorway and bleakly looking at them. What *had* been the use of it all, of Gene's planned and considered birth, of the envelope of care which she had wrapped around him, only to have to stand unseen like this and see him welded to the weeping daughter of a woman who had so freshly shot two men?

Although Ida had never in person experienced passion, she was not unaware of the effects of it upon, predominantly, the male sex. She knew by good repute its dynamite facilities for blowing up every sense, and most easily of all the sense of filial duty, and the nice emotion of filial love. In fact both of those gentle arrangements seemed habitually to be shattered first. She accepted, on this kitchen battleground, defeat; for what on earth had she, against that tangle, to use for shots?

She decided to go upstairs and see Lily.

Ida found Lily packing some things in a suitcase. It was Lily, and yet it couldn't be. Not this drained wraith. Ida noticed that the clothes being folded by Lily were all in the nature of serviceable things, and that they seemed as devoid of frivolities as possible. There was a grim sort of justice in this, an earthly effect of the dust-to-dust *motif*, that gave Ida a fleeting second of pleasure, for her own frivolities had never advanced beyond the respectable material of velvet and the color-note of plum.

"Ida dear—this is good of you. It's *kind* of you, Ida."

For a terrified instant Ida felt that Lily was going to kiss her, which would have been the worst possible prelude to battle, because sheer reflex action would compel her to kiss Lily back, and you couldn't launch a broadside from any such station as that. But even without the demoralizing give-and-take of kisses, it was going to be harder than Ida had thought. Everything, every weapon and advantage was on Ida's side (how different from the arena downstairs in the kitchen where a blind and surely nothing more than animal passion held the field!) but there seemed nothing to hit at: only this wraith which the mildest breath could easily blow away.

"Packing, Lily?"

"Yes, dear. For jail."

How hollow such victories, and what Dead Sea fruit! It struck Ida with a speculative astonishment that Lily didn't seem to *mind*. Anything unnatural horrified Ida (it was only during recent years that she could stand the sight of lipstick), and if ever there was a manner against nature, it was this resigned and ethereally dewy one of Lily's, a woman twice a murderess, and now packing her bag for prison. The normal attitude, Ida considered, would have been a blue funk and a good deal of cowering—with, desirably, an overwhelming spirit of contrition.

"Lily, I must speak to you."

"Yes, Ida?"

"About my son and your daughter."

"Nan? Oh, don't worry about that, Ida. I wanted to tell you at dinner last night that you weren't to."

"But I do worry."

"Really, you needn't." Lily added a little less ethereally, beginning to sense the mass of armament with which Ida so pointedly bristled: "Nan would never dream of dragging Gene down."

"Lily, you don't know what you're talking about. I've just left them, and they're—clutching."

"Clutching?"

"Yes, in the kitchen."

"Oh, surely, Ida—"

"*You* (think of that pre-Mansion House past!) "ought to know about passion."

"Ida dear, what has passion got to do with it?" This really was a little thick, to have a clutch, inspired by passion, added to everything else she had to worry about. Furthermore, Lily didn't believe it. If any such scene had or still was occurring, it was Gene who must have forced it, and Nan who was being clutched. She said aloud: "That's it, of course, Ida. You'd better go down and take another look."

Mad. That was a natural phenomenon and would explain all the rest. Lily was simply unhinged. Ida decided this, and cast tentative glances toward the door.

"Lily, I know what I saw, and I won't have it. I can't have it, Lily. Gene's all I've got."

"Ida, dear. Sit down."

Never. Oh, no.

"No, thank you."

Lily thought: "Oh, the poor *thing!* I do not know what she must be suffering." In addition to her usual frostiness Ida had taken on a shriveled and a frightened look, and Lily suddenly wondered whether the trouble that was at

the basis of Ida's fear might not be a dread of loneliness. Lily supposed, kindly, that a mother felt that more about a son than she did about a daughter, especially about an only son who showed symptoms of leaving the nest.

"Please listen to me, Ida: I've learned a lot of things during the past couple of days. I've learned how little we know our children. You'll find out that that's true with you and Gene, just as I've found it out about Nan."

"Nonsense."

"No, it isn't. And what's worse, Ida, you'll some day find out how much they know *us*. Ida dear, don't hate me. Don't feel about me the way you do. We're both in the same boat, if you'll look at it sensibly—each the mother of an only child."

Ida felt outraged, with a good deal of justice, at being placed in the same boat with a murderess *en route* to jail (which took care of Lily's future), and with heaven knew what sort of an early Past. Simply on the silly basis of each having an only child.

She said with conviction: "You are a wicked woman."

"Oh, please don't be stupid, Ida. I know how miserable you are, and I'm sorry for you, deeply sorry. Another thing I've learned lately is that if a thing is important enough, your child is going to do it, and you might as well face the fact and like it. I gave birth to Nan when I was Nan's age. I know now what a fool I was about Robert; but nothing, no older person, —certainly no parent,—could have stopped me from marrying him. Mother tried, and I hated her for it. By the time I stopped hating her, she was dead, so I coudn't tell her so."

"Oh—"

"Yes. No matter what happens, don't get Gene hating you, Ida. It isn't worth it—not even trying to stop him from marrying the daughter of an accused murderess is worth it. You'll find out."

"You *are* wicked, Lily."

"Because I want you to face the truth?"

"I suppose that's it." Yes, it was it. "Oh, Lily—what shall I do? What shall we do?"

Ida did sit down. She had never felt so unusual before. Not even a few short hours ago when Gene had driven on in his car and had left her standing, stripped and deserted, in the cold snow. Lily wasn't mad. Not unless there was a lucid sanity in madness that went beyond Ida's powers of belief. What Lily had said was true. What was the use of anything in the world if you

found yourself, at life's dreary end, hated by your son? What price was too big to avoid it?

Ida said reflectively: "I don't think you are."

"Are what, Ida?"

"A murderess. You can't be."

Lily grew suddenly unwraithlike and very solid, and her eyes were no longer dreamy, but shiningly clear. She said nothing.

Ida said: "Who killed those men, Lily?"

"Mr. Hefferfield is assured that I did."

"Why is he so sure about it? Doctor Starr told me downstairs that they were arranging to arrest you. That is true, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. As I told you, I am packing."

Ida looked at Lily for quite a while. Ida thought it strange: these new and acute feelings that were so newly overwhelming her — not a renaissance exactly, but a fresh sort of birth entirely.

"Are you shielding somebody, Lily?"

"No."

"Well, I think you are."

"No, Ida—no."

"I think I know you. It's like meeting you for the first time. You just said you were sorry for me. I think that now I am sorry for you, Lily dear."

"Dear Ida."

It was very awkward. You couldn't discard a lifetime of whalebone stiffening just by shaking it away. Ida would have liked to make some gesture of tenderness, but she knew none.

She said: "I suppose you know that I'll be in a jail as well as you, Lily. In a sort of way."

In the mirror, Lily was satisfied with the plain gray tailored tweed. She went out into the hallway. Its lights were still on, in competition with the sullen morning; and a uniformed policeman stared at her stonily for an instant and then shifted his eyes to an inch or so above her head. From the landing she saw Dr. Starr at the foot of the stairs, talking with another uniformed policeman. Lily waited until Starr seemed to have finished.

"Doctor Starr—"

"Oh—yes, Mrs. Elsert?"

"Would you mind?"

He came upstairs and joined her on the landing.

"I am trying to set things in order, Doctor."

"Yes?"

"I had meant to ask you earlier whether you would be good enough to take a look at Delilah."

"Is she ill?"

"I don't know. She has the usual 'misery' which could cover anything. I'm a little worried about her. About her manner."

"Manner?"

"Yes. Sheffield and Nan and I went up to her room after Mr. Hangaway had gone. She apologized for wanting to stay in bed—with her misery—and her manner struck me as being queer. Will you come up with me now?"

"Of course, Mrs. Elsert."

They went upstairs.

Lily rapped on the door and said: "Doctor Starr is with me. May we come in. Delilah?"

Several seconds passed before Delilah's voice said: "Please do, madam."

They went inside, and Lily found the scene unchanged. The room was gloomily a little brighter, and the shadows from the bed-lamp were gone. Delilah still was sitting up on the bed, and clutching the bright pink nightgown tightly about her withered body.

"Good morning, Doctor Starr, sir."

"Good morning, Delilah. Which misery is it this time?"

"Just a general all-around touch kind, Doctor, sir."

Going over to the bed, Starr felt Delilah's wrist, taking her pulse. His eyes widened sharply; and it seemed to Lily, as she stood watching him, as if his body stiffened. He kept his fingers on the wrist for a full minute, saying nothing.

Then he said casually: "What have you been eating, Delilah?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, sir."

"Well, we'll see."

Starr looked penetratingly into the soft blank darkness of Delilah's eyes. He gently rubbed a fingertip across her upper and lower lips.

He said: "Nothing to worry about. You might take this prescription downstairs if you will, Mrs. Elsert, and ask one of the men to go to my office for it? Miss Wadsworth will give him the proper stuff."

"Yes, Doctor."

Starr took a prescription-pad from his pocket.

"My writing is the usual unintelligible scrawl that is always attributed to medical men, Mrs. Elsert. The worst thing about the libel is that it's true. Here's the proof of it."

He tore the sheet from the pad and handed it to her. A shock ran through Lily as she read:

Hangaway is in this room. Go outside and leave the hall door wide open. Do not summon aid. That is imperative.

Lily forced her voice to be natural and calm.

"Doctor Starr will have you fixed up in no time, Delilah."

"Thank you, madam."

"I'll join you downstairs shortly, Mrs. Elsert. I just want to take Delilah's temperature."

"Yes, Doctor."

Lily's eyes, as she walked toward the door, were conscious of the room: swiftly speculative even though her flash of terror as to where Hangaway could be hidden. The bed was angled from a corner, and Hangaway could be crouched behind the head of it, of course, and the door to the clothes-closet was an inch ajar. Her nerves jangled as each step seemed bent on becoming a prelude to some swift and narcotic-conceived plan of destruction, some weapon beyond the rational mind with the forces of mania directing the attack. Her fingers shook as they closed about the doorknob. She opened the door to its fullest extent. She went outside.

Starr shook a thermometer down.

He said to Delilah: "Just hold this under your tongue."

"Yes, Doctor."

Starr was vibrantly conscious of the moment's menace. He knew his maniacal minds. To combat them, you had to place yourself upon a comparable plane, matching oddity with oddity, thinking ahead if possible into that diseased morass where the very essence of bright cunning was bred. He favored behind the head of the bed as Hangaway's place of concealment. He judged that a knife or an ice-pick from the kitchen would be pressed between the ornamental ironwork and through the pillow against which Delilah leaned, as a grim reminder of what an injudicious gesture or remark on her part could lead her to expect.

He took the thermometer from her mouth and put it in its case, and back in his pocket, without looking at it, and staring all the while at Delilah, sending his wave of thought into the dark pools of her knowing old eyes.

"Ninety-nine degrees. Well, that's nothing. I'd go light on food today, Delilah."

"I will sir, Doctor."

"Just stick in the neighborhood of toast and poached eggs. Some tea."

"Yes sir, Doctor."

With quiet fingers he loosened the bedding which lay above her lap.

"Have you pains anywhere? Any aches?"

Delilah looked at him earnestly, inquiringly, seeking his

lead.

"Well, sir—"

"How's the chest, and the muscles in your back? Does this hurt?"

A strong arm slid behind her back; his other slid beneath her legs, and in an instant her withered fragility was gathered up swiftly off the bed, swiftly out into the hallway, where he set her down, and shut the door. He said to Lily, who was standing motionless at the stairhead: "You can tell them to come up now, Mrs. Elsert. Tell them to be quiet about it, and please suggest that a man be posted outside in case he jumps from a window."

"Yes, Doctor."

Starr held Delilah until she had stopped her fit of trembling.

"Go downstairs, Delilah."

"Yes, Doctor Starr, sir. I would wish in view of this blessed deliverance to—"

"Quickly, please."

"Yes, Doctor, sir."

She pressed his hand and went unhurriedly, a withered travesty in voluminous pink, a travesty that was negated almost entirely by the dignity which was innate in her.

Starr stood and looked steadily at the knob of the door. No sound came from within the room whatever. It was not a man, he meditated, who was in there, but an elemental force, a power and a strength which were cunningly motivated by the obverse of logical reason. A hundred weapons lay at Hangaway's hand, even if you excepted the probable one of the kitchen-knife, or the ice-pick. The barrenness of an asylum cell exampled that: its lack of any weight, or movable object, or cutting edge, or pointed thing with which to stab.

Starr's problem absorbed him. It did not deal with Hangaway. It dealt with Lily. He could himself, he felt, be a match for Hangaway, and the added odds of the other men in the house made Hangaway's capture or his death assured. Even a single tear-gas grenade would cover any of that.

But none of those things would cover Lily Elsert.

There was this about Hangaway as Starr reviewed it: he mustn't be captured and so turned into a sullen mute; he mustn't be killed during any attempt at escape; and he mustn't be permitted to take his own life. He must be left, and interviewed, at ease. Starr moved several steps away from the door and closer to the stairhead, picturing in his thoughts a probable view of Hangaway, who would now be crouched or

standing in a speculative silence with an ear pressed against the door, a bemused finger resting perhaps on the home-shot bolt.

Hefferfield headed the silent advance.

Starr motioned him to silence, and brought his lips close to Hefferfield's ear, whispering: "There is a bare chance that he may let me come in."

"Take this gun."

"No. It can't be done that way."

"He'll kill you. You should have seen him when he went beserk at the hospital."

"He won't go beserk if I can help it. He's got to talk."

"Talk about what?"

"The truth about why Parne and Hainestead were killed."

"What do you think he knows?"

"No one knows what he knows, not even himself. It's my job to find out."

"You're taking too great a risk. We'll sweat it out of him."

"You couldn't. This is psychiatrist's job, not a policeman's. This is the time to do it. This moment might not come again."

"What's the difference? We've proved that Mrs. Elsert shot Parne."

"I've just got hold of as good proof that she didn't."

"What is it?"

"It's in conection with the blood-group. . . . Quiet—he's testing the handle of the door."

Slowly, in the hall's gloomy light, the knob revolved, went back, was still, in the stillness that was broken alone by the sound of men breathing.

"There may be some noise," Starr whispered. "He may have a flash of violence, but don't come in unless I call. Keep everyone below the level of the head of the stairs. He'll take a look out into the hallway. Hurry."

Starr waited until the men had retreated down the stairs. He went to the door and rapped.

"This is Doctor Starr, Mr. Hangaway. Will you let me come in, please?"

"You and who else, Doctor?"

"Nobody."

"What do you want?"

"You, Mr. Hangaway."

"You must be crazy."

"Possibly. I think I can persuade you that there has been enough blood. Are you in any condition to talk rationally "

"Aren't you being insulting, Doctor? Stand away from the door."

"Certainly, Mr. Hangaway."

Starr moved back and stood against the opposite wall. The door inched open, then opened wider. Hangaway was a pipe-like shadow against the dullish gray within. His large head turned upon Starr, and then moved and examined the empty hallway to right and left.

"Come in, Doctor."

"Thank you."

They went inside, and Hangaway closed the door, thoughtfully shooting home its bolt.

"I find that you interest me, Doctor."

"We mutually interest each other."

"Yes. Try that rocker. I understand that they're coming back again, as collectors' pieces of *virtu*. Funny animals, men."

"Very funny. In fact, their humors are endless."

"You must think I don't know."

"Know?"

"That there are men outside. That they're stepping softly up to the door. That they're waiting for me."

"Oh, that."

"I want you take a good look at me."

"All right."

"Look at my face. Look at my whole general appearance. Would you want me as a friend?"

"I don't know. But if I should, y o u r appearance would have nothing to do with it. It never does."

"You're wrong there, Doctor. It has a lot. I'm forty-seven, and about forty of those years have taught me."

"I'm afraid I still can't agree."

"Let me put it this way: I'll admit the matter is an obsession with me. Who are the malcontents in life? They're the ugly people—not your sort, because you haven't the kind I mean—but my sort, the type of ugliness which hints at, which verges on the repulsive. Look at your press pictures of the average communist, or agitator, or any sort of fanatic crusader. They're a proof of what I mean."

"I suppose your panacea for such discontent would be a blanket order on a plastic surgeon or a beautician?"

Hangaway smiled thinly.

"Well, there's nothing so fantastic in that. My point is that ugliness is a positive handicap. People do not seek you out. They either ignore you or avoid you, and make their voluntary contacts with people who are pleasant to look at. The inner soul, that inside shining goodness, is all tripe so far as I'm concerned."

"Yes, so far as you're concerned."

"Do you think I have none?"

"I think that you failed, or were prevented from cultivating it."

"No. No, it would have done no good. I'm not a malcontent in the sense we've been speaking of. I belong to the other group of ugly people, the ones who use their handicap as a springboard to leap into power and success. But there is a drawback common to both classes, Doctor. We live alone."

"Yes, that is true enough."

"We're single people except for whatever companionship is put up for sale. We've our sycophants and our court jesters in ratio to our money or our importance, but we have no friends. It becomes our one great dread."

"Solitude?"

"Yes, Doctor. That's why I let you in here. You took away the negro woman. I want company when I go."

"Aren't Parne and Heinestead enough?"

"They're dead already."

Starr smiled at the statement's simplicity.

"You're not going to die, Mr. Hangaway."

"I should find small pleasure in living behind bars, Doctor. I think our journey will be best."

"Your childhood is at the bottom of this."

"That's right. It and my face."

"It alone. You have a good many years left you in which to readjust yourself. I say that sincerely."

"I know you do."

"Just now you're at the apex of a pitch you've been working yourself up to during the past few days. Or has it been for longer than that?"

"It's been since the time the boys started getting wise to Hainestead."

"Do you mind telling me?"

"Not a bit. That jug's cracked. For me at any rate."

"I don't know Detroit very well. I suppose it all centers there?"

"Yes; and in the little town of Dumfrith, Michigan. Did you know much about Hainstead?"

"No, just the general outline which Hefferfield has given me: Able, energetic, and ambitious—the leading industrialist of Dumfrith, and already getting a foothold in Detroit."

Hangaway nodded.

"That's right. The strong, fearless, attractive type. A man's man, a friend of both capital and labor. His wife is very attractive, and is ambitious to be the most socially prominent woman in the State, and his daughter

has her ambitions too." A look of awe came over Hanga way's face. "When this thing breaks!"

"What, Mr. Hangaway?"

"Why, that the kid's illegitimate, of course."

"His marriage—"

"Marriage? He was a lousy bigamist. He married Gertrude Witstock of Dumfrith two years before his other wife—now Mrs. Elsert—got her divorce. And the kid, the current Jennie Elspeth Hainestead, popped out on the nine-months' dot."

"You speak of the boys—"

"The people who dislike him—the local neighbors in Dumfrith and the fellows in Detroit who don't like his muscling in."

"And they know all this?"

"No, they suspect something like it, but they've got no proof. They know it the way a lot of big stories are known but never break. Doctor, you would be astonished at some of the stuff that is simply waiting for the first public false step before it is cracked down on the heads of a lot of important men."

"I suppose that's true. You say the boys have no proof in this case?"

"That's right. Parne came here and got it, of course, but he's dead, and Hainestead himself is dead, which leaves me. It's a shame, Doctor. Do you know something? I think I'll get out of here. I'm not going to waste this. I can still take Mrs. Hainstead and the kid for a million. I can take her for every nickel she's got."

Calmly, reasonably, Starr argued:

"That's a pretty big order, isn't it? It means killing, killing me, killing Mrs Elsert and her daughter, killing seven or eight armed men. I think it's stupid to figure on it, Mr. Hangaway."

"I suppose you're right. It's a pity, though. I don't like things to go to waste."

"You aren't being very clear about all this."

"How am I not?"

"Or possibly I'm a little dense. Possibly it's because I'm not accustomed to mixing with important men. What's plain to you seems a bit unreal to me."

"What things?"

"Well, Hainestead in Detroit; how Nan Elsert entered into it; then Elsert here—you speak of the boys getting wise—what put them wise?"

"That's easy. Miss Elsert's picture in the Detroit papers after she won the design contest did that. You could feel it run all through town: 'What's Jennie Hainestead from Dumfrith doing winning

a design contest? No, it isn't Jennie Hainestead. It's some girl called Elsert from some town in Ohio called Laurel Falls. Well, would you believe it? You could take them for twins. But after all, everybody has a double. Look at the movie stars, at the doubles-contests, at any prominent person. So forget it.' So people did forget it, Doctor. But the wise boys didn't. Not them."

"Why?"

"Any pelt has some value, Doctor, and a political pelt runs into real dough. I don't have to tell you that. And remember that once Hainestead set out to cut some ice in the big pool, he was right out in front, all washed and combed, as a target for mud. Naturally they had dug back into his past. They traced it easily to two years before his marriage. That was when he first hit Dumfrith. He wasn't an ugly man. Doctor. He was one of the lucky ones."

"Yes, I could see that. He would be attractive to women, especially back at that age.

"Right. Young and dashing and gallant Worthby Hainestead fresh out of the golden West. A smart boy."

"Just how, especially?"

"Because he announced San Francisco as his origin. Because he announced that his parents and every contact that could be authenticated about him were wiped out in 1906 during the earthquake and the ensuing fire—in fact, that the horror of it all upon his childish mind had made the whole thing practically a blank. That was very smart. You cannot substantiate nor deny any statements by poking about in cinders."

"No, you can't."

"Well, it was always in the back of the boys' heads. It was so good it was too good. So when Miss Elsert's picture broke in the press, they didn't watch Miss Elsert; they watched Hainestead."

"Of course—"

"Sure, you get that. Being a doctor."

Starr asked suddenly: "What does Mrs. Hainestead look like?"

"You're right. She's the general type of Mrs. Elsert."

"That so frequently happens with some men, with their successive wives."

"Yes, there's every reason why the half-sisters should look alike. The Hainestead girl is two years younger, of course, but she's lived harder. Honestly, Doctor, these débutantes!"

"They get over it."

"Sometimes. Well, there you are."

"I'm afraid I'm not. Not yet. What did happen in De-

troit after Nan Elsert's picture appeared?"

"As I say, they watched Hainestead. Oh, he saw the picture all right, and so did Mrs. Hainestead and the daughter. The boys have Hainestead's chauffeur on the payroll so there isn't much they don't pick up. Mrs. Hainstead just commented on the likeness and forgot about it. So did the girl, after some occasional chit-chat about it among other girls in her set. It struck both of them as amusing but as very unimportant."

"But not Hainestead, of course. Hainestead knew."

"That's right. He fixed it to meet Miss Elsert. Casually. Only, the boys considered it wasn't casual. It spelled the first flicker to them and they knew they were on to something really hot. I don't know what happened at that meeting. I don't e v e n know whether they actually met. All I know is that both of them were at the same cocktail party one afternoon—a big party. . . . I had my own ideas."

"What were they, Mr. Hangaway?"

"I like to look at all angles, Doctor. I figure from the other end: that maybe Miss Elsert had come to Detroit on purpose to put the bee on Hainestead. You see, the thing that held the boys up from the start was that they didn't know positively what Hainestead's name really was. They considered it might be Elsert, because they didn't know right away that Mrs. Elsert had remarried and that the daughter had legally taken the name of Elsert. They got a girl to contact Miss Elsert easily enough, but all she could find out was that there was a Mrs. Elsert in Laurel Falls, a widow, and that Nan Elsert's father was dead. Then the boys put Parne on it."

"Just who was Parne?"

"He was a guy who knew his way around. They used him a lot. But personally, I always thought he was overestimated. He lacked finesse. His usual method for getting the dope on a woman was a cross between the chief suspect in a horror film and a ham juvenile, with a good deal of both lurking behind the arras. He certainly fancied himself, that boy."

"Why did they use him then?"

"Because he got results, no matter how crudely he got them. Then they'd get a laugh out of him, too. But the women wouldn't. U s u a l l y they'd be worried into fits by all of his hamming, and ready

to come across with whatever dope he was after on his first serious pass. I know he started his usual routine with Miss Elsert. He began to flush her out, make her lose jobs, almost blacklist her. He'd show every now and then and let her get a look at his face with one of its most significant expressions. Lord, *what* a ham, Doctor. I guess Miss Elsert dreamed about it in nightmares."

"How do you know all this, Mr. Hangaway?"

"Well, I came into it around then. Right after the boys hired Parne for the job, Worthby Hainestead hired me."

"Why?"

"You don't get to be where Hainestead got by being a dumb bunny, Doctor. He knew what was going on. He knew they had sicked Parne on Miss Elsert, so he sicked me on Parne."

"You said a moment ago that you were doubtful about Miss Elsert, that you considered she herself might have come to Detroit to blackmail Hainestead."

"That's right. I knew definitely she was out for dough, but I figured now it was just the small-time stuff of trying to lead one of the money-boys up to the altar. I figure she must have doped Parne out as a bouncer for one of the First Families."

"Why were you in doubt at all about Miss Elsert's purpose if you were in Hainestead's employ? Why didn't you know?"

"Listen, Doctor: When you work for a man like Hainestead you know only what he tells you and you do only what he tells you to do. Miss Elsert and fifty other people might have been trying to throw their hooks into him and he wouldn't tell me about it, or anybody else about it, unless he had a purpose too. My job was Parne and just Parne."

"Just what kind of job? Or do you mind?"

"Not a bit, Doctor. It all centered around Hainestead's real name. They had found out by then all they could, in general, about Mrs. Elsert, about her coming here to Laurel Falls around the same time that Hainestead showed in Dumfright, and about her calling herself a widow, Mrs. Robert Wardley. You can see what a job it would have been."

"To do what, Mrs. Hangaway?"

"First they couldn't be sure that Wardley wasn't just a name which Mrs. Elsert had picked out, to cover whatever it was had happened before she got here. And even if

Wardley was the right name, it would mean the impossible feat for checking every divorce record for years in the name of Wardley or Hainestead all over the country. Absolutely impossible, Doctor."

"Yes, of course."

"They felt Mrs. Elsert might have the documentary records here in the house, or in town, or else that Parne could get the information from her by his delicatessen tactics. Once they got her copies, or the dope from her, they could then check the records at their source. That's why Parne came here."

"And you, Mr. Hangaway?"

"Hainestead gave me twenty thousand dollars with which to buy Parne over to our side. If Parne couldn't be bought—which is a laugh—or if he shoved the ante up too high, I was to use my judgment. That meant killing Parne and getting busy on the Elserts."

"You didn't kill Parne."

"I know I didn't." Hangaway's bright eyes grew speculative with interest. "Do you know who did? I know."

"Hainestead killed him."

Hangaway's eyes gleamed.

"That's right. How did you dope that out, Doctor? They've got Mrs. Elsert sewed up and in the bag."

"If Hainestead were alive he could be sewn up in the same bag."

"But how?"

"Mrs. Elsert did a lot of foolish things, because I believe she felt her daughter was involved."

"Sure, but how do you pin it on Hainestead?"

"Blood."

"Yes?"

"Parne had Group AB."

"Rare."

"Yes. Mrs. Elsert got some of it on the sleeve of her negligee while she was holding up Parne's body, and putting his fingerprints on the doorknobs. Do you recall the layout of the hallway outside of the room Parne occupied, and outside of the one you yourself used so briefly?"

"Yes."

"There is a shallow alcove, if you remember, at the end of it. It has a door opening into a linen-closet."

"Yes, I know."

"That enters into my reasoning; but first about blood: Consider Hainestead. He was shot through the head. It was the type of wound that bled a little, but not excessively. There were the normal blood-trickles on his face, but there were also several bloodstains on the white cuff of his shirt. It bothered me as to how they could have got there, and

there was the further fact that they were not fresh. You will understand my interest in Mrs. Elsert's welfare, that I wanted to leave no possible contradiction unchecked?"

"Certainly, Doctor. For a town like this she is O. K."

"Well, Hainestead's blood checks as Group O, whereas the bloodstains on the cuff of his shirt have just been identified as Group AB—that is, Parne's. Which places Hainestead as well as Mrs. Elsert upon the scene of Parne's death."

"Any D.A. could make it stick on her, in spite of that."

"There is more. I have just finished looking. There is another stain. It is on some linen in the linen locker where I believe Hainestead waited, resting his hand and freshly bloodstained cuff on the linen, after he had shot Parne and searched the body, and while Mrs. Elsert was doing her stupid and tragic act in Parne's room. Mrs. Elsert could not have transferred that stain from the sleeve of her negligee. It is on one of the higher shelves, where a man's hand would reach naturally for a rest, and where his cuff could leave it on the linen. Mr. Hangaway, Hainestead had hired you to do his work for him. Why did he come here himself?"

"Doctor, who can tell about a man like Hainestead? They get so smart they get too smart for their own good. This business meant the ruin of his career, if not of his life. He hired me, yes, but why should he take a chance? He would want to check me, if possible, with his own eyes. Then you have the blizzard."

"Blizzard?"

"Sure, the jams, the road conditions, all of it. Hainestead trailed me from Detroit, only I stopped off at that filling-station, and he passed right by it in the blinding snow and reached here alone."

"Of course—"

"Sure. He parked his car in town and walked here to the house and looked in the living-room window, and saw Parne at the secretary. Then he simply tapped on the window. Parne recognized him and maybe got scared stiff, or maybe saw a chance for a swell shakedown. Anyhow, Parne pocketed the pearl-handled gun that was in the secretary and opened the front door and let Hainestead in. They went upstairs to Parne's room, and Hainestead got tough and Parne pulled the gun on him, and Hainestead just took the gun away and shot him."

"Why didn't Hainestead leave the house at once and

start back for Detroit?"

"Because Parne didn't have the papers. Hainestead tapped on the window before Parne found them, and Parne was just putting on a bluff. So Hainestead had to stick around here until he could get the papers himself. He used the rafters in the attic."

"When did he get the papers?"

"Well, what with the cops about, he didn't get a real chance until I came here from the hospital and knocked out that pretty boy on guard at the front door. He took his time going through Parne's room, and then he came downstairs and found them in the secretary."

"Where were you?"

"That was just when I had finished with Mrs. Elsert and her daughter and the darky, and while I was coming downstairs myself. Naturally I wanted to talk it over with Hainestead, and I had the cop's gun, so we went back upstairs and into Parne's room and talked. I told him how I had him for bigamy and for murder—and we talked for quite a while, but it was no use. He made a jump for me and I had to shoot him, and take my chances for a real shakedown with either the boys in Detroit or with the widow and the Dumfrith daughter direct. You were downstairs at the time with some other guy, Doctor, and Miss Elsert was just saying good night and coming upstairs, so I came up here and got behind the negro woman's bed. I kept her quiet with this."

Hangaway took an ice-pick from his hip pocket and tapped it gently against one pipelike knee. He said to Starr very quietly, "How did you know that I was here in the room, Doctor?"

"Because you had planned to leave it, to make your escape."

"Yes?"

"You had taped Delilah's wrists and her lips with adhesive tape."

"Yes?"

"When Mrs. Elsert knocked and asked whether she and I could come in, Delilah didn't answer for several seconds. During that time, you removed the tape and got behind the head of the bed."

"Yes?"

"Surely it is obvious, Mr. Hangaway? When I felt Delilah's pulse I also felt the sticky glue which remained from the tape about her wrist. I felt it also over her lips."

Hangaway shook his head slightly and sighed. A flash of sudden irritation made his fingers tremble.

"Just think, Doctor—because of a little thing like that. All of the trouble for nothing."

"I hope you are including in it the rather tragic amount of trouble that came to the Elserts."

"Them? Small-time stuff, Doctor. Just a couple of little people who happened to get in the way."

"Yes, I suppose you do look at it like that. That Hainestead looked at it in that way, and the boys did too."

"Why not?"

"Well — thank you, Mr. Hangaway. Are you ready to come with me, now?"

Hangaway looked at Starr steadily for a while. It was impossible to read a single thought behind the dull smoky glaze which was masking the former glitter in his eyes. He flicked the ice-pick impatiently in his fingers.

"You're coming with me, Doctor. Not me with you."

Starr took a small metal case from his pocket.

"You said that I interested you, Mr. Hangaway. I think that this will interest you even more than I do myself." He opened the case and spilled a hypodermic needle and a vial of pellets onto a table. "Morphine."

Hangaway grew rigid and sat very still. Slowly, the ice-pick dipped and dropped, ignored, from his twitching fingers. He gave a small strangled cry that was more animal than human and started to walk slowly toward the table.

Starr unbolted and opened the door.

"All right, gentlemen. You may come in."

Lily took off the tailored gray. She did not want to see the suit again, with its reminder of the torment of the past few hours. She wondered about the house, too; whether it were spoiled for her forever, or whether time and the sunlight of succeeding days would cleanse it of its bitter memories. They were too vivid, and much too close upon her now to tell. This room with the foot of the bed on which Hangaway had sat —the slipper-chair—the window at which Hefferfield had stood—the place where Sheffield, beaten, had crumpled and dropped—each step with its wrenching reminder.

This basin in which pink had spread while Nan—and that — and in the mirror, standing in the doorway, just as she had then been standing in the doorway, was Nan.

"Mother—"

"Darling?"

"It's stopped snowing,

Mother."

Lily dried her hands, wondering what move to make, what word to say, and then she thought: "That's the trouble. She's my child. I've had to guard each word, each move, each minute of the past long days, and I'm still thinking in that groove. She's my child, and no words or gestures any longer matter, because there can't be any wrong ones, any longer. We've been frugal, both of us, with the things that really count."

She put the towel down and started to hold her hands out. But again, with vivid cruelty, it was like the night; they dropped to her side, and the marble of the basin was cold against them.

Nan moved a hesitant step, and was closer.

"I'm so glad about Gene, darling."

"I've been an awful fool, Mother."

"No, you haven't, Nan. Neither have I been. Things have to hurt you before you can cure them."

"Gene thinks it will be all right if we don't wait for so awfully long. Do you?"

"I think whatever you do. I always shall think that way, Nan."

Nan's fingers touched her arm, warm, melting little spots of feeling which reached on back through the years, leaving to Lily a child once more cradled against her, with their futures blank to write on. And everything was fixed. Tightly, and so simply, just by this hanging on to one another, making up for the past, and sealing the coming years. If you could imprison a moment under a clear glass bell—

Lily thought: "I'm being foolish, because I'm happy and because I'm tired, and because we're close now. Close. Even when she's married to Gene we will be. She's never been so truly mine."

Delilah rapped and came in.

"I have arranged some breakfast, madam."

"Thank you, Delilah. We'll be right down."

Delilah too seemed to feel that it signified things, that the acts of nature were a link with the acts that happened in your living.

"It has stopped snowing, madam."

"Yes," Lily said, "I know."

Lily put on a house-dress of nile wool, feeling younger and refreshed and more forgetful with each second that passed. She went with Nan out into the hallway and thought it amazing how pallid its special memories were so quickly

growing. How bright the tense whiteness of the morning made the hall below, with Lorrimer waiting stolidly down there in the bright white pool.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "We all thought we'd like to eat. You haven't got rid of us. We're all here."

"I suppose there's nothing I can do about it."

"Nothing at all. Just be graceful, and pretend you're glad of it. I understand felicitations are in order, Nan. It's about time."

"Thank you, Mr. McKeith."

"I won't have that, Nan. Say 'Lorrimer' the next time you speak to your mother's imminent husband. Go ahead —say it."

"Lorrimer."

"That's better. You're a grown girl now, and it's time you had some manners. Are we going to stand here all day, Lily?"

"I'd like to, Lorrimer."

"So would I. Beat it, my good child, for a minute—will you, Nan?"

"Yes, Lorrimer."

They stood for a while looking after her, and Lily said, "I'm thinking of the other one,—Nan's half-sister,—and the mother. Must they be told? Is there anything that can be done, Lorrimer?"

"It has been, Lily. They're not to know. Chance brought them to this house in refuge from the storm, Hainestead and Hangaway and Parne, and that's the story. There'll be no trial, because Hangaway is admittedly insane. He'll never talk. Starr gives him just a little while to live."

"I saw her photograph, you know. I thought her Nan."

"You thought too much, you sinful woman."

"I'm not. I'm just a wreck."

"Nothing that a good overhauling won't fix."

"Lorrimer—"

"Lily— Lily— Lily." . . .

And so, and so, and so. Forever after.

NEXT MONTH—

Presumably there must be limits to how many adventures the most enterprising trouble-seeker can accidentally tumble into. But there is NO limit to the problems than can be brought to him—if he has a reputation like the Saint—as we see in

THE ELLUSIVE ELLSHAW

—a short Saint novel, by LESLIE CHARTERIS in the May 1964 issue of your *THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE*

what's new in crime

by Stefan Santesson

Many years ago I was fascinated by Taylor Caldwell's interest in what I can only describe as somewhat more than unpleasant people. I was rather disturbed by what I considered her unwarranted attack on Richelieu, and France and the French, in one of her earlier novels, and wrote a long "defence" of the Cardinal which appeared in *Pour la Victoire* which, in the interval between acceptance and publication, had come—perhaps understandably—to represent the Giraudist viewpoint in this country. Since, then as now, I unhesitatingly believed in the mission and in the sense of destiny of Charles de Gaulle this, to put it mildly, helped further to complicate life in those days.

I have, in the years since then, followed Miss Caldwell's career with considerable interest. She has unquestionably come to be one of the most important of those writers who may be said to belong to a school of thought the importance of which cannot be denied after these recent months, even when regretted. I am afraid I still find it difficult to accept her approach to people and to life, even as

Another report on recent novels in which SMM readers may be interested —and on trends in this field. The writer, editor of this magazine since 1956, was editor of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club between 1945 and 1952.

reflected in her comparatively mellow THE LATE CLARA BEAME (Doubleday, $3.50), which I am distressed to find I have not previously commented upon.

The thinking of the murderer is familiar. "Damn her. Damn her and everything she is. Her childishness, her stupidity. After I married her I thought I could make something out of the cursed situation, after all. There was all that money. But it was no use. Her naivete, her trusting idiocy, her belief in everything; it used to make me ill. Marriage to a fool is hell. It's worse than being married to a whore." (pps. 180-181) I am not denying that there are such men—such people—but I *am* distressed at this continued preoccupation, after so many years, with this sub-Freudian and amoral aspect of our society. Throughout these years, the only interesting characters in Miss Caldwell's novels have been such people, arrogant and amoral and inexpressibly contemptuous of those around them. It may *be* naive of me to think so, but I am afraid I do not share the author's obvious feeling that all good men are fools. . . .

Boysie Oakes (not to be confused with the considerably more formidable Boysie Singh) is a cheerfully improbable recruit to the Ian Fleming school. Boysie's task, in John Gardner's THE LIQUIDATOR (Viking, $3.95) is to liquidate individuals who have become embarassing to Her Majesty's Government. This may be said to be the true story of Boysie Oakes however, and we have no way of knowing what James Bond's reactions were to this—this "truth". . . .

Patrick Wayland's somewhat improbable DOUBLE DEFECTOR (Doubleday, $3.50) has to do with the defection of what the press describes as two "key officers attached to the National Security Agency." Fast moving but formula.

Simon Harvester's RED ROAD (Walker, $3.50) takes Dorian Silk to Samarkand and through the lonely mountains of Azerbaijan. Somewhat less than credible, but interesting.

I've referred previously to Jan Broberg's MORD FOR RO SKULL (ie., MURDER FOR AMUSEMENT), published in Sweden in the Spring of 1964. This is one of the first books in Swedish about mysteries and mystery writers and trends in the field from the earliest days. Recommended.

AN EDITORIAL ASIDE

We normally bring you, each month, ten—eleven—twelve—stories and articles which, each in their way, reflect the richness and variety of the material found in this genre.

This month we are however departing from our usual policy and bringing you an unusually long—and important—short novel by Rufus King, one of this country's outstanding writers in this field. We do so because we know you are going to agree with us that here is a close to ageless portrait of a way of life that—tonight's headlines to the contrary—is still the strength of this country.

The tempo of life in Laurel Falls is concededly not that of our larger cities, say New York or Chicago or Los Angeles or Detroit, but I think very few among you will disagree with me that in the people who live in Laurel Falls, in Colin Starr and in Lorrimer McKeith and in the fiercely protective Lily Elsart, there is a strength and a probity and a fundamental fine-honed courage that is a part of our traditions!

In addition to this we are deeply honored this month to bring you a new story by Phyllis Bentley, one of the most distinguished writers of these times. I am certain that many of you will remember, as I do, her A MODERN TRAGEDY, THE SPINNER OF THE YEARS, and INHERITANCE, and more recently novels such as THE HOUSE OF MOREYS.

All this and also Hal Ellson's new story about Detective Victor Fiala, Robert L. Fish's somewhat irreverent variation on the Agent 007 theme, and another challenging article by Mr. Charteris.

Next month, in addition to a long and exciting Saint story, THE ELLUSIVE ELLSHAW, and a new story by Barry Perowne, we are publishing a definitive article, DEATH IN ANCIENT EGYPT, by Y. N. ibn Aharon, which I am confident will interest many of you. Rabbi ibn Aharon, who holds the D.D. and Doctor of Ecclesiastical History degrees from the Central Conference of Sephardic Seminaries of Salonika and Marrakesh, is an Aramaic and Gheez scholar who has been living abroad for the last few years. In this article, the first of a projected series dealing with Crime in the Ancient World, he will demonstrate how disturbingly "modern" these people were in their reasoning and in their approach to the somewhat less than gentle art of murder. . . .

See you next month! H.S.S.

(Continued from Other Side)

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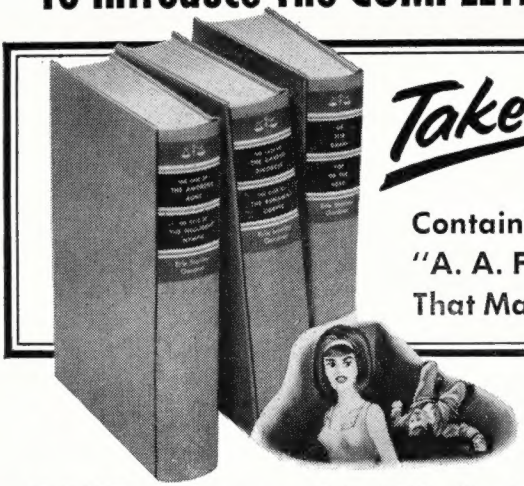

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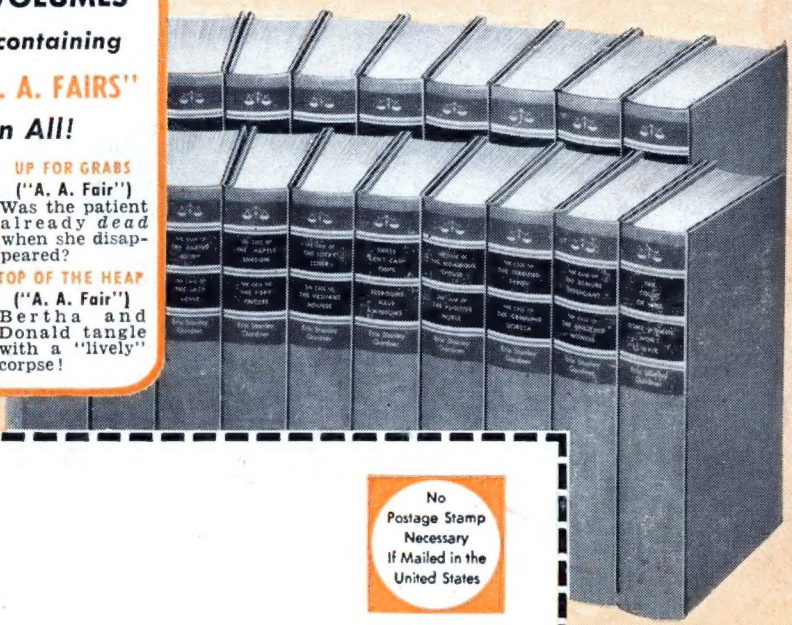

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